

In The Aftertime – Chapter 1

I'd fallen asleep caring for Nancy, waiting for her fever to break. I awoke with a start, having not intended to sleep at all, at least not until she was out of danger. How long had I been out? I struggled to get out of the chair, clear my head, keep my eyes open. I knew that, either way, I'd know when I checked on her; people either came out of the fever and began to recover or they burned up and died. I opened the door and looked at her, she looked so peaceful. I knew immediately that she was gone. People who came out of the fever poured sweat, begged for water, were restive.

I slumped against the door frame trying to keep from collapsing. Why did I have the rare gene that produced the immunity and not her? According to the CDC, less than 0.1% of the population had the gene meaning that fewer than 300,000 people would survive. Not quite I Am Legend (Omega Man) stuff, but close. At least the survivors wouldn't turn into something resembling zombies or whatever.

I composed myself and wrapped her in the blanket. She seemed so light as I carried her to the back yard and laid her gently on the ground. Before she'd gotten sick, we'd tried quarantining ourselves because we were preppers and didn't have to go out for anything. As an extra precaution, we'd even worn N-100 masks, at home, lest something airborne get us. I'd dug two graves in the backyard during this period, just in case. When she became ill, I began to wonder if it was my going out back to dig the graves that exposed me to something airborne that I infected her with.

It started much like a cold and was highly contagious. If a single member of a family got it, everyone seemed to have it within a day or two. Except for about 0.1% of the population that seemed to be immune, that is. They didn't discover the immunity right away and once they did, it took weeks to identify what provided it. Frankly, I'm surprised they discovered the source at all. And, they never really gave the disease a name so I don't know if it was some kind of bacteria or a virus. Anything that involves more than a Band-Aid escapes me.

I'm not sure now, but it would seem that I have the city to myself, the population before was around 25,000. All things being equal, there should be enough of everything to last me well beyond what Nancy and I prepared for. I know one thing I'm going to do right away, salvage. Before she got sick, we discussed what we'd do after. We had time because we'd quarantined ourselves. Not good enough, I guess...

One thing we'd discussed was our needs after. We had a pair of AR-15s, a pair of Browning Hi-Power Classics in 9mm, and a well used Winchester model 12 12-gauge with a short barrel. We had LTS food from several of the online places, especially Nitro-Pak. County Living Grain Mill, dozens of pails of wheat, oats, corn, beans, rice and #10 cans of lesser things, ammo, toilet paper, feminine hygiene supplies, and other things I'd never need.

I finished filling the grave and had a word with God about her eternal soul. He's probably

pretty busy right now because this pandemic wasn't limited to one city, one state, one country or one continent. How many is 0.1% of 6 billion? Six million? Ahh, screw it, maybe I should just sit down and die, we never discussed just one of us making it. I'm only 30, it's a long time to be alone. It would just be my luck to never see another living soul and the only thing I really need to salvage is food that will last, like pasta, beans and rice.

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One of the things Nancy and I discussed was cleaning out the gun stores, both to prevent the renegade survivors from getting them, and to up arm ourselves. There was one store in town I wanted to hit if no other, they sold military arms and ammo. They had a Barrett M82 sitting in a display case and lots of the Barrett .50 caliber ammo. The owners' personal weapon was a HK91 and his wife's a HK93.

I had a bite to eat and got my pistol and rifle so I could check out the gun store. While I'm at it, I think I'd better look around for a bigger generator, my small one pooped out. I was about out of gas anyway. That's one thing we never really gave a lot of thought. If there were a war or something, you'd expect the power to be out. But the flu, or whatever it was?

It only took about 20 minutes to get there, probably because there wasn't any traffic. The store was locked up tight, but I brought a sledge hammer and it wasn't that hard to get in. I looked around first to decide what I wanted to take. Should I take everything or just what I can use? That's funny because I only have two hands and at most could only shoot two handguns or one long arm at a time. I didn't see his HK91 or her HK93, either. They lived above the store and I checked upstairs, only to find two bodies in a state of decomposition. There was an unlocked gun safe and I checked it. It contained more than the two HKs.

The Pelican case contained a Springfield Armory M25. There were two Springfield Armory Hi Capacity GI 45s with more than a dozen high capacity magazines. I put them in the pistol case and hauled the SA stuff to my Suburban, and then returned and got their other personal guns. Next, I broke into the case holding the Barrett and loaded it into its case and added that to my haul. Then, I took the .50 caliber ammo and went back to empty the other cases. I couldn't do this in one trip so I got the guns and planned to come back for the ammo. Maybe I'd better stop by a U-Haul place before I come back.

When I got home, I backed into the garage, closed the door and unloaded. Why did I do that, when there's no one around? Once I was finished, I grabbed a coke and headed back to town to get a trailer and the ammo. We had looked for a home standby generator, one time, and the only place in town that sold them was the rental place. After I get the trailer, I'll go there before I get the ammo.

Wouldn't you know it, the only trailer sitting on the lot was a 6x12 open trailer, but the price was right. The rental place had a Kohler 30REOZJB. That's a diesel that is rated

at 100+ amps prime power. I used a fork lift to slide it onto the trailer. I also grabbed a small 3-phase gas fueled generator to haul around and power things, like the fuel pumps at the gas stations. Finally, I went back to the gun shop and cleaned the place out, filling the trailer and my suburban.

When I got home, I pulled around back and left everything sit while I had something to eat. I made a quick tuna salad sandwich, added some corn chips and pigged out. I was tempted to wash the whole thing down with a beer, but that had better wait until I get the stuff unloaded and put up. The ammo was heavy and he had a lot of it. I probably have a lifetime supply, if not more. The ammo went into the garage and I left the diesel genset on the trailer. I filled the tank on the little genset with my last can of gas and fired it up to re-freeze the freezer and cool the refrigerator.

This has been the longest day of my life. I did part of what we discussed after she was buried, just to keep from thinking about her. Now, I'm sitting in my chair with my hand wrapped around a lukewarm beer. Until I get the big generator set up, I don't have power for the DVD player or the TV, so I can't watch a movie and not having anyone to talk to is driving me crazy.

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Ouch, I'd better find a better way to get to sleep, my mouth tastes sort like... it's hard to describe and I think this is a 3 Excedrin moment. I slept on the couch; I couldn't bring myself to sleep in our bed. I had a cold shower, put on the cleanest clothes I could find and grabbed a bowl of cereal. I need to get more powdered milk today. First, I have to get that diesel generator setup and hooked in and find some fuel.

I hooked a chain to the generator and wrapped the other end around a tree. When I pulled ahead, the generator slid off and I went slowly, so it should be ok. It took me a couple of hours to wire it in, add water, check the oil, and it looked good to go, once I got some fuel. It's a heavy SOB, I think it must weigh close to a ton. I'd better go back to the rental place and pick up oil filters and a few cases of oil; it takes 8 quarts and 9 with a filter.

I'm still feeling fuzzy so I got a pad out and made a list: air, fuel and oil filters, oil, fuel, gasoline and powdered milk. That's quite the list, isn't it? I think maybe I'll switch to one of the .45s and take his HK91. I don't think I'll need it, but I'd feel better having something with more stopping power. I'll have to find time soon to check out the sighting on that M25 and the Barrett. They aren't much use to me until I do. If you been following my thinking, you know that 0.1% of 25,000 means there could be as many as 25 survivors in town. I'm the only one on our acreage, but that doesn't mean someone might not show up, especially once the generator is running.

Plus there are two gun stores in town and I only cleaned out one. The other one mostly sells hunting rifles, shotguns and .22 rifles. Still, a .22 in the back of your head could totally ruin your day. First things first, I went back to the rental store and got the filters and

a dozen cases of oil. I had the gas generator in the back along with my empty 5-gallon cans. Next stop, it was on the way, was a grocery store where I cleaned out the powdered milk and all of my favorite cereal. I added a case of beer to that; once the refrigerator was running full time, I could keep it cold.

As far as the diesel fuel was concerned, the paperwork with generator said anywhere from 1gph to 2.6gph. That's a whole lot of #2 diesel fuel, there are about 725 hours in the average month meaning anywhere from 725 gallons to just short of 1,900 gallons. If I could find a tanker and both the truck and trailer were filled with diesel, I'd have 16,000 gallons, enough for 9 months in the worst of times and 22 months in the best of times. There was a truck stop on the edge of town and if I got lucky, there would be one or two tankers there refilling the tanks. I made that my next stop and there were three. One was empty, one half empty and the third full. I moved my other purchases from the Suburban to the cab and drove the full one home. I dropped the wheels, put my stuff in the garage and drove the tractor back to the truck stop. Using the portable generator, I first refilled the gas cans and then used 2 diesel pumps to start refilling the one empty diesel tank.

That took most of the day and when I finished, I drove home, dropped the second trailer and had supper. This time it was a nice New York strip, baked potato and sautéed mushrooms. Washed it down with two ice cold beers. After supper, I had a look at what I'd needed to hook up the tankers to the generator. I had to jury rig one of the tankers to the ½" feed line the generator had, but I managed, using odds and ends from the garage. It fired right up and I noted the time. If I expected it to last, I had to closely observe the maintenance schedule.

I was tired tonight and didn't need any more beers to get to sleep, although I slept on the couch for a second night. It was sure nice to have power even though I was sure you could hear the generator at least ¼ mile away. It was an enclosed model with that critical sound reducer but once I got used to it, it didn't keep me awake. Before I dropped off, I made a new list for tomorrow: refill the empty diesel tanker, get the Suburban back and check out the other gun store. When I got all the critical things out of the way, I was going to have to find time simply to grieve. But as long as I had something to do to keep busy, the grieving could wait.

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I was up bright and early the next day and headed back to the truck stop to refill the third tanker and secure my supply of #2. I ran 4 pumps at one time pumping from two hoses into each tank. That ran most of the day and while I had down time, I checked out the restaurant and store at the truck stop. I grabbed the 4 CB radios they had plus 4 mobile antennas. From the restaurant, I took several #10 cans of vegetables, sauces and what not. I put it all in the cab of the one truck I'd been using and when the tanks were full, drove it home and dropped it, keeping the tractor. I got into Nancy's Old Jetta and drove it back to the truck stop to pick up the Suburban. It was getting late, still I had enough daylight to check out the other gun shop, albeit briefly. I hadn't stabilized the

fuel yet, but I knew the Marina at the lake carried PRI-D by the gallon and I needed 24-gallons to stabilize the fuel I had. I also need PRI-G while I was at it; I was down to my last quart.

I got the Suburban and checked out the gun shop. It was still locked up and didn't appear to have been broken into. I next headed to the Marina and cleaned them out on PRI products, they must have just gotten a shipment in, I did very well in that department. It was getting dark by the time I got home and I was looking forward to the other steak (we packaged 2 in each package), another baked potato and more mushrooms. The diesel generator was purring along and it wasn't as loud as I first thought. After dinner, I put on a DVD titled *Virus* and fell asleep halfway through.

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My list for the next day included cleaning out the gun shop and starting in on the grocery stores. The old barn the acreage came with had been cleaned out and the only thing I had in there was a small workshop. There was more than enough room for what food I thought I might end up with. I reconstituted some dried whole eggs and had scrambled eggs and toast. A short while later, I had broken into the gun store and between the Suburban and the trailer had all of the guns, ammo and archery equipment. I didn't really have room for any food so I went back home and unloaded. After another tuna salad, chips and a beer, I headed back to the grocery store. I cleanout out the flour, sugar, oil, shortening, pastas, pasta sauces, canned meats, canned milk and a large assortment of spices. I also got all the beans and rice I could find, including the precooked rice like Uncle Bens and Minute Rice. I made one final pass through and realized it would take one more trip; you can never have too much toilet paper or paper towels.

When that was done, I intended on taking a day off and watch the grass grow... all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, something I couldn't afford, not now. I threw together a box of macaroni and cheese for supper along with a can of green beans. Then I put on an old war movie, *Red Dawn*. When I took that day off, I intended to catch up on my washing, even though it meant line drying the clothes. Our hot water heater and kitchen stove were propane fuelled and I'd better add more propane to my list.

Once I had everything I could think of from the store, I unloaded the food into the barn where I'd put the rest of it and took a long hot shower before I started dinner. I was in the mood for beef stew and opened and heated a can of Dinty Moore while the biscuits baked in the oven. I also make a pitcher of lemonade and passed on the beer, that was getting to be a bad habit. After dinner, I stripped our bed and used a set of sheets and blanket from the linen closet to make up the bed. I put the sheets in the washer to wash and would line dry them tomorrow.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 2

Although I had some trouble dropping off, I did and woke to a bright, beautiful day. I hung the sheets and blanket, and then reminded myself that this was my day off and I should just take it easy. That lasted about 2 hours before I became restless. I needed to check out the Barrett and M25 so I took the guns and ammo out to the pasture where we had a 1,000 meter range marked off. I set up my spotting scope and decided to start with the M25. I loaded a 10-round magazine with M118LR ammo, adjusted the BDC scope to 100 meters and put 3 rounds in the bullseye. Not bad. I cranked it to 200 meters and repeated the process, again getting 3 in the 10 ring.

I continued the process moving slowly out to 1,000 meters, getting about ½ MOA. I put the M25 away and grabbed new targets to replace the ones I'd put holes in. This time, I decided to only put targets at 2, 4, 6, 800 and 1,000 meters. The Barrett had the BORS system. It was as simple as turning the elevation knob until the LCD displayed the range. With that, I put 2 rounds in the bullseye at each of the 5 targets. The scope was a Leopold 4.5-14 power. It would appear that I had both an anti personnel rifle and an anti matériel rifle. Finally, I moved over to our small pistol range and got familiar with the .45. Other than being louder and having a little more recoil than the 9mm, it was about the same.

I returned to the house and cleaned the three guns. Then I prepared a box of macaroni and cheese for lunch. After lunch, I got out my notebook and brought it up to date, recording the events of the recent days for posterity or those space aliens who might come someday and wonder what happened to the planet. With that done, I sat back and reflected on my future. Yes, I had plenty of diesel fuel, for now. I needed a more permanent solution for power, something that would last past the fuel running out and the generator wearing out.

We'd talked about putting in a wind turbine, but the cost had put that beyond our reach. With the new pricing structure in effect, everything was free, that wasn't much of a problem. However, no one local carried wind turbines. It meant making a trip to the State Capital, there was a dealer there who sold Outback Power Systems and EMS E15 wind turbines. If I could find solar panels, I could back up the wind turbine and generator, although it would mean adding a rack of batteries to the basement. At the moment, there wasn't any rush so I could enjoy my day off.

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I wanted to check out some of the guns I'd found at the second gun shop, their sideline had been Single Action Shooting and I'd picked up an assortment of cowboy guns. There were Colts in 3 barrel lengths, a wide assortment of clones or near do like Rugers, Marlin and Winchester rifles in various calibers and a whole lot of ammo. They also carried leather, most of it the hand tooled Mexican imported stuff. It might be fun, but give me a pistol with a high capacity magazine and extra magazines; six shooters, only shoot six times and take forever to reload.

I picked out a nice rig and a Colt with a 7½" barrel plus a Winchester in the same .45 Colt caliber; in case I ended up riding horses some day. I hung the rifle over the fireplace and the gun belt on a hook next to it. It could serve as my backup if all my ammo was gone. What am I saying? That presumes I locate some of the other people in town who might have survived. I knew it was just a statistical average and I might be the only one. It was equally possible that there were 50 people here and nobody in the next town over.

I hadn't seen the Vincent Price movie nor the one with Will Smith. I had seen a DVD of *The Omega Man* and in that I don't recall Heston burying his wife. I had yet to find a single person who had survived while he was busy fighting them off. Heston was a doctor who survived a biological war using an experimental vaccine. One thing to add to my list is picking up some antibiotics from a pharmacy, just in case. I can do that before I drive down to the Capital, but I'd better put together a bag before I leave, I'm not sure how long it's going to take.

I got 2 5-gallon cans of water, a case of MREs, both long range rifles and the HK91 around and put them in the back of the suburban. I topped off the tanks and put the extra gas in back along with the portable generator. I loaded a Mossberg 590A1 with 00 buckshot and it went into the front with me. Finally, I hooked the trailer to the Suburban to haul whatever I found back. I didn't really want to make more than one trip to the Capital if I could avoid it, there could be up to 100 people there.

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Bzzzzzzzzzzzzz.....

The alarm woke me before dawn. I got a quick shower, made coffee, had a couple of the leftover biscuits and put the leftover coffee in a thermos. I was out and about before the sun was up. I could see in the pre-dawn light and left the lights off to avoid attracting attention. There were only a few cars along the road and most of those were stopped by the side or in a ditch. I had to use the median to go around one bad crash. Absent any traffic, the drive to the Capital only took an hour. I went directly to the store that had the power systems and parked in back. My pry bar made short work of the back door and I turned on my Maglite and started to search. By noon, I had a tower, an E-15 55kw turbine, solar panels, inverters, charge controllers and gel cell batteries. I also had the most important item, instructions on how to set everything up and integrate it.

I was anxious to get back home and skipped lunch, planning on eating when I got back to the acreage. As I pulled out from the back of power systems store, a shot rang out, hitting my windshield about in the middle. I turned right and floored it, but with the weight I was hauling, I was accelerating slowly. The next shot hit the back window, telling me that I'd turned away from the shooter rather than toward him/her. I must have been going 80 by the time I hit the edge of town and I didn't slow down until I was half-way home. I was going to need another vehicle or figure out how to replace windows.

Well, there are plenty of vehicles sitting around and since I have a lot of #2 diesel fuel, maybe I'll look around for a Dodge dealer and get a pickup with a Cummins diesel engine and 4 wheel drive.

I got a Laramie, Light Khaki Metallic, 6.7 liter Cummins diesel, Mega cab and added some extras, like a winch, gun rack, extra fuel tank and just the usual stuff preppers' dream of having. I spent a week on that before I got back to resolving my power situation. My first stage was to mount the solar panels on the south facing roof, connect them to the controller and hook in the batteries and inverters. Then, I got out my tractor and backhoe and dug a hole for a foundation for the tower. As near as I could tell from the instructions, I needed a 5' cube of concrete to mount the tower on. I figured about 5 yards of concrete and that meant Ready Mix. This wasn't an industrial unit and it only had an 80' tower; just enough to get it above the ground turbulence.

I had to let the concrete set up for 30 days before I could install the tower, but it gave me time to assemble the sections and mount the generator and turbine blades. I'd use the backhoe to lift it into place, try and maneuver it onto the bolts and tighten the nuts. Before I raised it, I intended to have all the wiring connected per the instructions. Meanwhile I had time to check out the other grocery stores and load up on more LTS foods: mostly beans, rice and pasta.

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While I was finishing up at the next grocery store, I thought I caught someone moving outside out of the corner of my eye. When I actually looked, I didn't see anyone. I couldn't tell if the person had been a man or woman, if I hadn't just seen a ghost or the person I saw was wishful thinking. I went home and unloaded the last of my booty into the barn, and then decided to go back to town and see if I could find the person I thought I had seen. Instead of a Dodge pickup, I really should have gotten an armored car for work like this. The only human being I'd had contact with so far had shot at me.

I took the pickup back to the grocery store and parked. Once I had my bearings, I locked the pickup and headed in the direction I saw the person. There was nothing or no one there, of course. I hoped to at least see smoke or some indication of another human being but the surroundings were pristine. The only smell I could detect was that of decomposing bodies carried on the breeze.

"Hello," I yelled in a raised voice, "Anyone there?" I waited to see if I'd get a reply, not that I really expected one. I decided to try one more time and give up if I got no response.

"Hello, Anyone there?"

I was just about ready to leave when I caught movement out of the corner my eye. I looked and a young boy, maybe 10 years old peered around a corner. This kid must be frightened out of his mind. If I pushed, he might take off and I'd never see him again.

"My name is John, what's yours?"

"I've got a rifle."

"Yeah? Well, I have one too. Did I see you earlier when I was in the store?"

"You didn't see me, John, this is the first time I've been out."

"Do you have a name?"

"Call me Andy."

"Well, Andy, would you like to come with me and get something to eat?"

"I don't know, I'm not alone."

"If you have someone with you, he... or she... is welcome to come and eat too."

I thought that if I presented a less threatening appearance, Andy might agree. I slung the HK freeing my hands. "Is that better?"

"Is what better?"

"I slung my rifle."

"I didn't," he replied.

"And, neither did I." The voice was female and came from behind me. I wasn't sure what to do so I slowly raised my hands.

"I'm not looking for trouble, ma'am. Are you with Andy?"

"I am. Slowly slide that fancy rifle off your shoulder and lay it on the ground. Then, empty that holster on your hip and put the pistol on the ground."

I complied slowly, not daring to turn and look at the woman who implied she had me covered.

"Is that better?"

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just shoot you and be done with it."

"I've collected quite a bit of food and even more fuel. I have electricity, running water and livestock. I have a good source of transportation and I'm not looking for trouble, like I said before."

"Turn around, slowly. Andy, keep him covered."

I did what she said; I might just get out of this intact. She was about 15' back holding a pump shotgun and she was pointing it directly at me. She looked to be about my age, was about my height, had long light brown hair that looked to be carefully brushed. Her clothes were clean and she was wearing jeans and a work shirt.

"You're wearing a wedding ring, what happened to your wife?"

"That illness. She died a few weeks back. Where is your husband?"

"The illness, as you call it. Apparently I'm immune and passed that to Andy. Do you live here in town? I don't recall seeing you."

"Nancy and I had an acreage outside of town. It's off the beaten path and we didn't have any near neighbors. Like I said, there's plenty of food."

"Why would you do that?"

"The CDC said that 0.1% of the population was immune. On average that means that only about 25 people in this community made it through. I've been going crazy without someone to talk to. I don't even have a dog."

"You can cut that number to 22, three guys tried to have their way with me and they're not among the living."

While she didn't say how they died, it had to be her or Andy. Obviously, this was a lady not to mess with. I wasn't thinking about that, not with Nancy barely in her grave. I noticed she was wearing a small cross on a chain around her neck. That could just be jewelry or a statement. She, too, was wearing a wedding ring.

"If you're not going to shoot me, how about we go out to the farm and have something to eat? It's a 3 bedroom house if you choose to stay, but that's entirely up to you."

"I saw you take that pickup, you know."

"That's salvage, there's no one left to claim it and I got my other vehicle shot up."

"Where? When?"

"I went down to the Capital to pick up a wind turbine and solar panels and someone shot the front and rear windows out of my Suburban. That was a few days back. That's the only reason I got the Dodge. Plus I have more diesel fuel than I do gasoline."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 3

"I found a pickup too. Unfortunately, I couldn't get any fuel."

"Gas or diesel?"

"Diesel."

"There are cans of both in the back of the pickup. Yellow cans are diesel, red cans are gasoline and the blue cans are water."

"Andy, come pick up his guns. Ok, let's look in the back of your pickup."

"Can I put my hands down?"

"Not yet."

We walked to the pickup and she told me to stop about 5' away. She worked her way around to the other side and looked into the bed, both confirming the cans were there and I had no guns in back. She didn't need to know about the .380 PPK in my IWB holster in the pit of my back. Like the song says, *you got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em*. It was my last bit of insurance, if I needed it, but I was clearly outnumbered. She also looked in the cab and took note of the Pelican cases and the Mossberg in the front seat.

"John would you care to drive us to where our pickup is?"

"What about my guns?"

"Give him back his rifle and pistol, Andy. What's that backup piece you have, a PPK?"

".380. I was hoping you didn't notice."

"I've been around firearms most of my life. That's not much of a gun, but I suppose a .380 is better than nothing."

"You saw the weapons in the truck?"

"Yes, two rifle cases and a shotgun. What kind of guns do you have?"

"An M25 and an M82."

"First class guns."

"They are, aren't they? I got them from..."

"I know where you got them, at least the Barrett. As far as I know, it was the only one in town. Where did you get the White Feather?"

"Same place. He had it upstairs in his personal gun safe."

Indeed, she was very gun savvy and I still didn't know her name. There's only one way to find out. "My name is John Brown, although my friends call me Jack. Would it be too forward for me to ask your name?" She got a strange look on her face.

"Molly, for now, and you know Andy's name. Did you clean out all of the grocery stores?"

"Just two and I only took the long storing staples."

"You a prepper?"

"At least you didn't call me a survivalist."

"We'd just gotten started, Andy and me. We had about 2 months worth of food put up and had acquired the shotgun and the 10-22. You did a good job of clearing out all of the ammo."

"Better to have it and not need it than..."

"Need it and not have it. I know and I only have 50 rounds of 00 buck for the shotgun."

"What's it hold?"

"Seven plus one. We wanted one of those Mossberg's like you have, but we couldn't afford it."

"What did your husband do?"

"Lately? He was unemployed. Before that, he was an iron worker, specifically a welder."

"Do you need to get anything? Clothes, special needs, medicine?"

"I have a BOB and if we decide to stay, we can come back and get what we need. Andy can sit up front with you and I'll sit in back."

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We put all five cans of diesel fuel in her tank and I told her she could fill up at the farm. She also had five of those yellow cans and I was surprised that she hadn't figured out how to get diesel fuel. Andy and she followed me back to the acreage and she parked her pickup next to mine. When they got out, she was carrying the rifle and shotgun and

Andy had a large bag. I noticed that the shotgun was never far from her reach, she still didn't trust me. I fixed a decent dinner and we ate. I don't know what I expected, maybe for them to be starved. They weren't if them minding their manners was any representation. We lingered over coffee until we'd finished the pot and I'd made another.

"Would you like a tour?"

"The house or everything?"

"The whole 9 yards. We can either do the house first or last. There are supplies in the basement and more in the barn."

"You said you cleaned out both gun shops. Can you improve what Andy and I have?"

"Molly, that depends. I don't want to give you the very gun that results in my demise. What did you have in mind?"

"Something in .223 for both of us plus pistols in, say, 9mm."

"How about a HK93 and Browning Hi-Power for you and the same Browning plus a Ruger Mini-14 for Andy?"

"That would do. I have no intention of shooting you as long as your behavior is appropriate. So far, it has been exemplary, if that's any judge."

"I just buried my wife not all that long ago. I've kept busy to avoid thinking about her death. I still have my mourning to do and until that's done, I won't be thinking about things like that."

"Do you find me attractive?"

"Well, yes. What's not to like? How did we get off onto this subject?"

"The weapons?"

"The safe is in the basement. I guess we'll do the house tour first, starting there."

I fixed Molly up with the HK93 and my Browning. Andy got the Mini-14 and Nancy's Browning. I fitted them out with holsters, web belts, magazine pouches for the Browning and magazine pouches for the rifle magazines. We took a few minutes to load the magazines and I showed them the food and supplies in the basement. We skipped the main floor because they'd seen most of it and I showed them the 3 upstairs bedrooms, indicating which one I used.

Next, we went out to the barn and I showed them all of the food I'd accumulated from the grocery stores. I next took them to the range and they paused and checked the

sighting on the rifles and fired two magazines from each pistol. That left us with the garage plus my explaining what I had in mind to ensure permanent electrical power. They didn't ask questions and barely spoke for the entire tour. It was like they were sponges absorbing water.

"You're going to need help raising that wind turbine tower."

"Maybe. I thought I'd raise it using the backhoe and shift it onto the bolts."

"That could be very tricky. It would be far better if one person were on the tractor and the other handled the tower. How long before you can put the tower up?"

"About 29 days."

"You asked what Andy did, but you never said what you did."

"I worked at the feed store in town, assistant manager."

"I noticed the beds are bare, do you have mattress pads, sheets and blankets?"

"In the linen closet. Need help?"

"I have Andy to help."

"When you talk about Andy, I never know who you're talking about, your husband or your son."

"I'm not about to call him Junior. I'll try and refer to my husband as Andrew and my son as Andy."

"Then you've decided to stay?"

"At least for the night. From the looks of you, someone needs to do your laundry. It might be a good idea to go back in town and pickup some new clothing, what you have will wear out and if we don't get it, someone else might."

We? I just nodded and kept my peace. Molly was right, I hadn't kept up with laundry and I was out of clean clothes, other than under clothes. She was certainly a woman with an independent mind. When we were on the range, she proved she knew her way around firearms, too. I was a fairly good shot, she was better, creating 3 shot groups with all the holes touching. Andy was about equal to me and considering the Mini-14 was new to him, he's more like his mother than like me. I think maybe I'll switch him to one of the AR-15s if it's ok with Molly.

o

I was up at 7am the following morning and when I looked out of the window, all of my laundry was on the clothesline, drying in the breeze. That included the jeans and shirt I'd been wearing and I had to scout around a bit to find a pair of pants. I showered and turned up in the kitchen wearing dress pants and a dress shirt.

"You going to Church?"

"You washed my jeans and shirt. I don't have a lot of extra clothes."

"We'll remedy that when we go to town today. Oatmeal ok?"

"Fine. Say, I got to thinking last night. Nancy and I both had AR-15s. What would you think about Andy using one of them?"

"For all of its shortcomings, I think the Mini-14 is a better choice. It doesn't fail to function just because it gets a little dirty. Anyway, you must not have paid attention; the one you gave him had a heavy barrel so heat shouldn't be a problem like it generally is."

"Sure, whatever you say."

"I went looking for your livestock. Unless you hide them somewhere, you don't have any. Plus there wasn't any hay or feed in the barn."

"I may have stretched the truth just a bit, Molly. The neighbor to the west has a large flock including chickens, ducks and turkeys. My neighbor to the east has about 10 hogs and 30 cattle. I'm sure that each of them has food put up for their livestock because I was able to feed them from the supplies I found."

"Who has horses?"

"They both do. Probably a dozen or more between them."

"Ok, shopping first. Then, we need to begin moving the livestock. I think we'll move the hogs, then the cattle and then the horses. I didn't see any chicken coop, so you have to build one before we move the chickens."

"Now, that's twice, you've used the term we. Doesn't that mean you plan on staying?"

"For now, yes."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 4

"We sold everything we need for chickens at the store. I can load up our delivery truck and bring out everything we need."

"Have you been collecting the eggs?"

"The thought never occurred to me."

"If the eggs are fertile, the chickens will be brooding so we'll have a larger flock, keep that in mind."

"How come you know so much about this?"

"Farm girl, born and raised. Didn't move to the city until Andrew and I got married. My dad treated me like a son and there isn't too much I don't know how to do on a farm."

Out of 25,000 people and 25 survivors in the city, what are the odds that the one I find knows more about farming than I do? With those kinds of odds, I really need to make a trip to Vegas. Heck, I could end up owning the casino! Plus, she's good looking, has a reasonable figure, can outshoot me and is a self starter. That was clearly evidenced by the laundry being on the line by the time I woke up.

"As soon as I finish this coffee, we'll head to town."

"How much coffee do you have stored?"

"About 48 cans, why?"

"After we get the clothes, we need to corner the coffee supply. We can also corner the tea supply because when they're gone, they're gone."

"We'll take the trailer behind the pickup."

"Yes, and we can check out that third grocery store. We might just as well have the LTS foods from there as well."

It was a shame we didn't have a Costco or Sam's Club here in town. However, we did have a Wal-Mart and it occurred to me that it might be a fourth source of food, guns and ammo. They carried clothing and I usually bought my work boots there. Just getting everything together was like a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. On the way to town, we stopped and fed the cattle, hogs and horses. We hit several stores and nearly filled the pickup box with clothing and shoes. Then, we went to my store and loaded up what Molly said we should take for the chicken coop. She was right and I just kept my mouth shut.

"We need a hen house. We'd better run by the lumberyard and load up what we need. We'll need 2x4s, plywood and nails to begin with."

"What about the grocery store? What about the coffee, tea and LTS foods? What about Wal-Mart?"

"We'll get what lumber the truck will hold and stop by the store on the way home."

Home? Home? I'd offered Molly a place to stay and within 24 hours, she'd taken charge. So far, she'd been about 100% right, but, that's not the point. I began to wonder, "What in earth have I gotten myself into?"

Instead of stopping at the third store, she led me to the first two stores where we cleaned out all the coffee and tea. Then, without missing a beat, we headed back to the acreage. This was starting to get interesting, what with terms like we and home coming into play. If I/we were going to get into fabricating buildings, I wanted either an electric or pneumatic nail gun. I might find one at the lumber yard when we went back. Then, it occurred to me, if we bring the livestock here, we'll have to empty the food out of the barn and find some other place to store it. That could be a very large shed or maybe a pole barn and this was getting very complicated.

We got home and unloaded. After a bite to eat she said we should now go to the last grocery store and load what we needed/wanted into the truck, pickup and trailer. So, off we went, by a different route so we could stop and feed the chickens, ducks and turkeys. I checked and there was maybe a month's supply of feed for the poultry so I'd have to load up at the store, soon.

After we got what we wanted at the grocery, there was still room on the truck and she suggested that we go back to the lumberyard and pickup more lumber and maybe a nail gun. Funny, I thought that only I had thought about that. The lumberyard had a complete setup with a pneumatic gun, compressor with tank and literally thousands of nails to fit the nail gun. We loaded up what we had room for and headed home. It took us about 2 hours to unload and then, it was time for supper.

"Spaghetti ok?"

"Anything hot will be just fine," I said getting a beer out of the fridge.

"I realized that we're going to need to build a shed to store all the food in so we can move the livestock here."

"Yes, I had the same thought. Truth is I'm not sure what to build. I thought about a very large shed or even a pole barn."

"Do you have a posthole digger for your tractor?"

"Yes."

"The pole barn might be a better choice; they had all the necessary materials at the lumberyard including poles and galvanized sheeting. You go wash up; dinner will be ready in about 5 minutes."

After we ate, I went into the living room to catch my breath and relax. Molly and Andy did the dishes and after they came into the living room.

"I'd better go get a shower. I expect you'll want your pay for all the hard work you did today."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sex. That's what all men expect isn't it?"

"Not this man, no. This man needs loving, not sex. And I'm not ready to be loved again, just yet."

"Ok, Andy and I will stay for the long term."

"What was that, a test?"

"A woman likes to know where she stands. I would have had sex with you if that's what you wanted, but it wouldn't have been love. And, that's all it would have been, sex. From one viewpoint, it's just another bodily function and you can bathe afterwards and wash off some of the grubby feeling it gives you. Love is much different and that takes time. Also, the sex you experience with love is much different and you relish in it instead of wanting to wash it off."

"Would you mind changing the subject, Molly? I'm not a prude, but this discussion is making me uncomfortable."

"No problem. Are we going to watch a movie tonight?"

"Pick one. I'll probably fall asleep halfway through anyway."

o

Well, that had to come up sooner or later, but I had assumed it would be much later. I'm a normal healthy male and the thought had passed my mind. It hadn't slowed down and had only been a fleeting thought. I didn't know whether she had been thinking about giving me sex to avoid being raped, it had been a simple test, or if she had long term plans. Probably not really long term plans, we hadn't known each other that long and might be totally incompatible.

As of this very moment, we only knew of 4 living people, the three of us and the person who shot at me in the Capital. There had been three others, but she mentioned that already. I woke up after the movie to discover Andy and Molly had already gone to bed. I made sure to set my alarm so I could be up at the crack of dawn, like she was. There would be livestock to feed, buildings to build and more to do than there was time in a day. I drifted off to sleep thinking of Nancy.

I was up, showered and shaved before Molly was up. I dressed in my clean clothes and went to the kitchen to make coffee. I set out syrup and pancake mix for breakfast and kept an ear open for her to get up and take her shower. I heard footsteps and then the stool flush followed by the shower running. I added the water to the pancake mix and started the large grill so it would get evenly hot.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Pancakes?"

"Pancakes are fine. I'll tell Andy to hurry up."

"How many shall I make you?"

"A small stack, three."

I was guessing that she mean a stack of 3 4" pancakes and poured 8 on the grill because I was hungry. However, before they were done, Andy came down and I gave him a stack of two. Not quite a teenager yet, he still had an appetite and I ended up making another 8 pancakes. We were done eating and the dishes washed by dawn.

"I think we'd better start on the pole barn first, Jack. Why don't we go to town and pick up the pole barn package I saw at the lumberyard and lay out where we want to put the holes? You can dig the holes this afternoon and we might be able to get the poles in place tomorrow. It would be best if we could get some Ready Mix to cement the poles in place."

"I can handle that, I got 5 yards for the wind turbine base."

"Andy, you will be our gopher."

"What's that?"

"When we need something, you can go for it."

When we arrived at the lumberyard and checked out the pole building, it was a complete set, including trusses for the roof. Everything except the trusses fit in the truck and it appeared we'd need a flatbed for them. Fortunately, the lumber yard's flatbed delivery truck was sitting there so we loaded them and each drove a vehicle back to the farm.

We unloaded the materials, being careful to keep them laid out for ease of assembly. The printed materials with the package included a blueprint showing the post layout and we used that yellow string and stakes to lay out the building. Once we had it squared up, we marked the posthole locations.

After lunch, I began digging the holes. I'm sure that had we the means, Molly would have been putting in poles and leveling them as fast as the holes went in. It took until dark to finish the holes. We had dinner, watched another movie and went to bed. We'd get the poles in and leveled tomorrow and should time permit, get a load of concrete to fill the holes. Then, we'd have to let the concrete set up a little before installing the trusses. While we were waiting, I assumed she'd have me working on the hen house and putting up the wire to keep the poultry in. I need a day stretcher.

I was starting to get accustomed to getting up with the sun and going to bed not long after sunset. This morning, I got up and turned off the alarm before it went off. The bathroom door was locked and I could hear water running, so I went downstairs and used the powder room and started a pot of coffee. When Molly came down, I went upstairs and got my shower and then woke Andy and asked him to get around. Molly fixed scrambled eggs, bacon and toast. We were outside setting posts as the sun came up.

Each post had to have two supports to keep it vertical. However, the 2x4s we used for that could be recycled into a building. It went much faster than I thought and after lunch, we drove to town to get a load of ready mix. The only loaded truck apparently had 12 yards on board so we drove that back to the farm and added the water. Meanwhile, we used more 2x4s to outline a floor between the posts and if we had enough concrete, would pour a floor.

As it turned out, we used very little concrete setting the posts and had enough leftover to put in a thin 3" unreinforced slab covering the whole floor area. That would set up fairly quickly, being thin, and by the time the hen house was done, we could finish the pole building. I can't imagine driving nails with a hammer, especially the number of nails it would take to build the hen house. Fortunately, I didn't have to find out.

As far as conversation went, there was very little. We worked well together and as we became accustomed to each other, albeit briefly, we moved with a coordination I'd never experienced before. However, keep in mind, what we were doing was working on insuring our long term survival and we didn't have a lot of time. The hen house was assembled as panels and all 4 were assembled and raised in a single day. The following day we framed the roof and the day after added galvanized metal as roofing.

After supper we went out and put together roosts for the chickens. One more day would be required to put in the fencing and we could move the poultry. Once the pole barn was done, we could move the food and bring the animals here. I was beginning to lose track of time, it was a succession of long hard days followed with all the sleep we could get in so we could go another day.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 5

By the way, it was an enclosed pole barn with metal sheeting on the outside walls as well as covering the roof. Think tin building. Moreover, it was done and tomorrow we'd move all the food and hopefully the livestock. I'd found time to go to town and haul a load of poultry feed and unload it into the unfinished pole barn. I had also gotten all the hay and such from the chicken farm and brought those horses over and let them run in the pasture. Molly had lined up a cattle truck and said it would take two trips to bring the hogs, cattle and remaining horses.

I hadn't realized that I'd put on a little fat, but my jeans fit more loosely and I've had to take my belt in a notch to keep them up. I'm going to town soon to get more jeans in an assortment of sizes because generally when you lose weight, you find it again. So far, we haven't seen anyone during our trips to town. That doesn't mean a lot because we don't go in and drive up and down the streets yelling, "anybody there"? I've also come to realize that Molly isn't so demanding, I'm pulling my weight and she knows it. I think maybe I saw her smiling at me today behind my back when I suddenly turned.

The only flab on her body is where it is supposed to be, a little up front, not too much, and a tiny amount on her hips. I'll bet her tummy is nearly flat as a board. She really is pretty, you know. I doubt she's ever bought any makeup beside a lipstick. She has clear eyes that can bore a hole right through you, if she chooses. She has surprising strength and I'd be willing to bet she has a large amount of muscle mass, in proportion, of course. I'm only slightly stronger than she appears to be. Better yet, she's a really good cook. I'll admit it, I'm becoming fond of her.

I thought that I'd feel guilty about developing a fondness for Molly, but I can't seem to muster the emotion. I loved Nancy, but she's dead and nothing can change that. I'm sure that Molly loved Andrew, but he's dead and nothing can change that either. Meanwhile we've worked hard and finally have most of the farm set up. The only thing left to do is erect the wind turbine and assimilate it into our power setup. Plus we're getting into spring and we're going to need to put in a garden using the heirloom seeds that Nancy picked out.

Those seeds were mostly things we both liked. However, she did buy one assortment that included things we didn't normally eat, like Swiss Chard. I read up on it and it is a beet that is grown for its leaves rather than its root. Of the various names for the plant, one is perpetual spinach. I don't like spinach so I may not plant that. In a way, Nancy is looking after me long after she died.

o

"If you think we're done erecting buildings and such, we need to get that wind turbine erected and prepare a garden."

"Are your seeds heirloom or hybrid?"

"Heirloom. There are several in an assortment that I wouldn't normally plant, but you can look at them and decide for yourself. I'm not partial to cooked greens and some crops like cauliflower and broccoli are something I only eat rarely. I don't know what it makes me but there it is."

"Picky. You're a picky eater. No matter, this year, we'll stick to the most common vegetables. How are you fixed on canning supplies?"

"We canned and have a large pressure canner. There are probably about a gross of quarts and another gross of pints plus two years worth of lids. I don't know as that will be enough, I can go to town and look around."

"We'll all go. There is safety in numbers, remember? Besides, you need to get some new jeans that aren't sliding off your butt."

"Did you take a class in mind reading?"

"No, why?"

"I was just thinking that."

"I want to do some shopping myself and I need to get Andy some larger sizes."

"Can I go with you?"

"No, it's for personal things."

I assumed she meant bras and panties and dropped it. Some women are very protective of their privacy and even Nancy hadn't liked me to shop with her when she bought underwear. I was thinking lingerie shop but she wanted to go to a department store. Not much difference, they were both in the Mall. So, while I picked up all the jeans I could find, Andy and she shopped together in a different part of the store. When I had all the jeans in the pickup, I waited at the store entrance, as agreed. I began to think she had gotten lost when they showed up carrying several bags.

"Wait, there's more. Please put those in the truck and we'll go back for the rest."

If anything, the second load was larger than the first load. Out of a sense of decency, I hadn't looked in the first set of bags and didn't look in the second group. From there we went to Wal-Mart because it had slipped our minds previously. Once there, we discovered that we weren't the only survivors. The gun cases had been broken into and several guns appeared to be missing. Certain sizes of ammo seemed to be out of stock, most .22, 12 gauge and .223. However, we got a fair amount of LTS foods and all of their coffee and tea. We took the remaining guns as insurance together with any remaining ammo.

On the way back home, Molly opened up and talked much like Nancy and I had talked. One might call it the usual chit chat for want of a better term. She did most of the talking because I was dumbstruck. She told me all about Andrew and her from the time they met until the time he died. Nothing personal, of course, but it gave me a sense of who they had been as a couple. I guess I opened up a little too and by the time we got home, I had touched the highlights of my relationship with Nancy from High School until she died. After the exchange, the silence returned.

There was a beef roast and vegetables in the crock pot and we ate not long after we got home. Molly excused herself to clean up, she said. Apparently, she took a shower because her hair was wet when she returned wearing a bathrobe. I was a bit sweaty myself and decided I might sleep better if I took a shower so I excused myself and soaked away the accumulated aches. I don't wear pajamas to bed so I put on clean under clothes and a robe and returned to the living room.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed," Andy said.

"I second that," I replied.

"I'll be up in a minute," Molly added.

I climbed the stairs and crawled into bed, figuring I'd be out in a couple of minutes. I heard the door creak as it opened and closed. Not a word was said as Molly climbed into bed with me.

"Make love to me."

o

Sorry, but you had to be there to understand why we ended staying up a good portion of the night. And, the details are none of your business. Most of my speculations proved to be true however and the lady is well muscled. The next morning she was all smiles as she woke me up then headed to the bathroom. I pulled on my robe and used the powder room before I made the coffee. When she came down, I went up to get my shower and shave.

"That was a surprise. Wonderful, but a surprise."

"I think it is time that we put the grieving behind us Jack. You are who you appeared to be and that's a complement. I can't take Nancy's place anymore than you can take Andrew's place. That said, I think we make a fine couple."

"I can't argue with that Molly. There is one thing I would like to know."

"What's that?"

"What was your married name?"

"I thought you knew from Andy. It was Brown. So, if we choose to present ourselves as a couple, no one will be the wiser."

"Are we a couple?"

"Do you want to be?"

"The idea is growing on me."

"Then we are. I'm now Mrs. John Brown and there is no one to say different."

"What about Andy?"

"He went shopping with me yesterday and we talked. His only remark was 'Fine by me'."

"Don't we need to say vows?"

"Do you promise to love me and keep me in sickness and health and hold yourself only unto me until death do us part?"

"I do."

"I do, too. There, the vows are said and we saved thousands."

You have to admit, Molly had a practical side. We didn't have a license, but there was no one to issue one. We didn't get blood tests, but we both seemed healthy. We sort of got the cart before the horse, if you know what I mean, but hey, isn't it better to know you're compatible before you marry than after?

o

It didn't take long to get the wind turbine mounted and running. The key to the whole process appeared to be the controller I'd gotten in the Capital. The solar charged the batteries and the wind turbine supplied the electricity. When the wind stopped blowing, the controller switched to the batteries and inverters and if there wasn't enough power, the generator kicked in. Or, something like that.

After lunch, we went to the barn and saddled three horses. I quickly ran back to the house and got my cowboy guns. The saddle on my horse had a scabbard, so it made sense in a strange sort of way.

"Do you have more of those?"

"More what?"

"Cowboy guns."

"About two dozen and several rifles. Why, do you want a set?"

"We'll both take a set, depending on what you have."

Molly took a Colt with a 5½" barrel with a matching Winchester and Andy took a Vaquero in .357 with a matching Winchester. He loaded his gun, rifle and belt from a box of .38 Specials. Then we returned to the barn and went for a ride. The acreage is only 20 acres so a person could ride the fence in just a few minutes. When we got back, Molly said she wanted to ride some more and we could use the opportunity to check out the general neighborhood. I almost caught myself saying, "Yes Dear," but we'd only been married since breakfast so that would have to wait.

When she told me her last name, I have to admit, it nearly freaked me out. Then, I recalled the funny look she got on her face when I told her my name was John Brown. What was that line that Bogie said in *Casablanca*? *Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.* We'd already checked out the chicken ranch and the cattle ranch so she wanted to know if there were other farms in the area.

"There's another in both directions, take your pick."

"Which is the closest?"

"The one to the west."

"Let's go that way and check it out."

"Lead the way."

The place was about 4 miles, an hour's ride, give or take. We rode side by side, visiting along the way. Molly filled me in on her being a farm girl. She was raised on a corn farm in Illinois. They had hogs, cattle and horses and she had been riding almost since she'd learned to walk. She was the oldest and her brothers didn't come along until she was ten. Her father needed help and naturally gravitated to her until the boys were old enough. When they took over, her mother had a job teaching her to cook and do girl things.

I explained that I was a city boy and only rode a few times when I went to a riding stable or to a friend's ranch. It had taken me a while to overcome my fear of horses and until I did, the horse always had the upper hand. My grandfather had gotten me into shooting sports, giving me a single shot .22 rifle for my 12th birthday. At 15, he got me a 20 gauge single shot shotgun and taught me how to hunt. After Nancy and I got married, we turned towards prepping and began to accumulate firearms. Once again, my grand-

father got involved and paid for half of our guns and most of our ammo.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 6

We'd talked to each other more in the last two days than we had since we met. The usual process is you get to know each other and if it works out, you might get married. We did it backwards, I guess, starting with sex, then a 5 minute marriage followed by the getting to know each other part. But, the more I learned, the more comfortable I became with the idea of spending the rest of my life with Molly.

As we approached our destination, I eased the rifle out of the scabbard and kept it handy, just in case. Don't believe that movie crap that shows cowboys shooting guns from the back of a horse. If you're lucky, you might be able to dismount and keep the horse close by wrapping the reins tightly in your hand. It takes training and probably tranquilizers to keep a horse from shying from gun fire. I didn't loosen the thumb loop of the revolver, figuring that if I did, it might fall out if I had to dismount quickly.

However, there wasn't a sign of human life. There was a dog and he didn't seem to appreciate our presence. Molly tugged something out of her saddle bag and tossed it to the dog. It must have been food and he must have been hungry, he settled right down.

"Hello the house."

After we waited about 5 minutes, Molly suggested I get down and look around. I eased off my mount and handed her the reins. Now I loosened the hammer loop, just in case. The door was unlocked and presented no difficulty to my entry. Once I got in, it only took one whiff to know what had happened here. I put a little Vicks under my nose, which I had for just this purpose, and went looking for the bodies. She was in their bed and he was sitting in his chair in what I took to be a small office. I could have been a repeat of Nancy and me, except this guy lacked the immunity.

I spent a few minutes checking out the house and located weapons in his office gun safe plus a large supply of canned goods in the basement. We couldn't move these by horseback so I made a note to come back with the pickup the next day. I figured to bring a shovel and put them in shallow graves. As small repayment for sharing their supplies. Once outside, we checked the grounds and all the livestock was dead, apparently starved to death. Molly whistled to the dog and he dropped in trail looking, I presume, for another handout.

"We'll need dog food."

"Yes, I guess we will. We might as get cat food too, who knows what might show up next?"

"I take it they were dead?"

"She was in her bed and he was sitting in the chair in his office. He had some nice guns and there were a fair amount of canned goods in the basement. I plan to come back

tomorrow, pick up the stuff and bury them."

"I'll stay home and tend the livestock and see about starting some plants for the garden."

Andy butted in with, "Are you my dad now?"

"No, Andy, I am not your dad. However, I am your friend and as friends, you should feel free to call me Jack."

"Did mom and you get married? I heard you talking when I came downstairs."

"In the eyes of God, I guess we are, but I'm not so certain it's totally legal. We exchanged vows, but we didn't have a license, blood test or a minister."

"Ok dad, that's all I wanted to know."

In a space of about a month I'd gone from being a childless widower to being a married man with a 10-year old son. It would take some getting used to. Molly was real easy to get used to and full of surprises, as I would learn in the near future. The relationship between a man and woman is unique. There is no place for comparison, a point that Nancy clearly made while she was still lucid. I think it was something Molly knew because she rarely brought up Andrew. The closest she'd come was to comment that Andy was a spitting image of his father when he was the same age.

o

After we got back, I unsaddled the horses and gave them a rub down while Andy fed the livestock and Molly assembled supper. There were two milk cows but both were dry. One of Andy's new duties was to gather the eggs every morning. It seemed to me we'd have to butcher some of the hens because we had way too many eggs and no way to store them.

"That smells good, what is it?"

"Tuna noodle salad with peas. After you get done at the neighbors, we should go to town and look for a large chest type freezer, a seal-a-meal and bags. If we can find more jars, we can also can some meat. It tastes good and makes a quick stew or other dishes."

"I was thinking it wouldn't hurt to clean out the equipment from the meat department of one of the grocery stores. We could use butcher knives, a meat saw, a commercial grinder, slicer and a tenderizer."

"Don't forget to get a commercial knife sharpener while you're at it."

"We can go to town together. That will give us a chance to look for more jars, lids and maybe a second large canner. We should be sure to get plenty of dog food at the grocery store or the pet store. The department store might have the freezer we're looking for. Plus, we can pick up a second trailer for your pickup."

"How long will the fuel you have keep?"

"It's stabilized with PRI-D, so quite a while. But, I cleaned out all of the PRI products from the Marina first thing. I don't have a lot of gasoline so if we can find a farm tank, which would help, so we'll have fuel for the tractor."

"All three of the farms we've visited had farm tanks."

"Yes, and most of them were full so they would be hard to move."

"Can't we empty one and store that gas? Then, we could transfer the gas from the second tank and top off the first tank. Repeat the process with the third tank and go get enough to finish filling it."

"That should work, especially if we start with the tank containing the least amount of fuel. I can also pick up more gas cans to hold the extra. I have 5 cans at the moment, but several places in town sold those Blitz 5-gallon cans. There is quite a bit of diesel fuel and gasoline at the truck stop."

"Do you have a chainsaw?"

"No, we always heated with coal. Ok, add a couple of Stihl chainsaws to our list plus put the oil to mix with the gas and anything else we might need. You have to give me some time, I rather new to some of this."

"More like you are new to a lot of it."

"Yes, that too."

"We should get coal at the power plant, but when that runs out, we'll have to switch to wood. What do you use propane for?"

"The kitchen stove and the hot water heater."

"How much propane do you have?"

"Probably less than we need, why?"

"First off, we can keep an eye out for a wood burning kitchen stove and secondly, we can find a larger propane tank and limit its use to the hot water heater."

"I guess that's doable."

o

We sent Andy off to bed and took showers for another night of bedroom antics. We must have been more tired than we thought; on this night we got a lot more sleep. We were up at dawn on the next day and after breakfast I got my shovel and headed over to the farm. I dug a large shallow grave and placed the wrapped bodies in it. After covering it over, I began to load the trailer and pickup with guns and supplies. I can't tell you what made me look, but the barn's loft was full of hay and the corn crib was half full. That greatly improved our livestock feed condition and I decided to leave it where it sat and come and haul just what we needed, when we need it.

It occurred to me that if I got the flatbed from the lumber yard, I could probably haul the hay in two trips. The corn would be another matter because it wasn't shell corn, it was still on the cob. I wasn't quite sure how to deal with that.

"That's easy," Molly said when I explained the problem. "Some farms still use old fashioned corn pickers and they hire a sheller to come out and shell their corn. We can check the Yellow Pages, but I'm almost positive that I saw a corn sheller one day in town. We can check the Yellow Pages."

"Did you make a list of what we need for our trip to town?"

"No, I'm not as obsessive compulsive as you are. I have a mental list, but if you need a written list, I can make one."

"Are you ready to head to town?"

"Let me make a quick pit stop and we'll be on our way. We'll take the military weapons and not the cowboy guns for this trip."

"Already loaded into the pickups."

I had my own list to make sure I didn't forget something. It was longer than usual: drums/cans to store gas; chainsaws; propane tank(s); coal; and, lumberyard truck.

We started at the lumberyard and got the truck because we could use it to haul the other things on my list. The propane dealer had several tanks and I settled on a pair of 550-gallon tanks for ease of handling. We loaded them and their cradles aboard the flatbed and chained them down. We checked the power plant for coal and they had a lifetime supply. However, we'd need a dump truck or something other than the flatbed to haul it. Our next stop was a store to get gas and diesel cans; they didn't have enough to be of any use so we went looking for some clean 55-gallon drums. We found some at oil change shops, a total of six. We had one stop left, a chainsaw dealer. I selected two professional models that had changeable blades and got 3 blade sizes and extra

chains, chain oil, two cycle engine oil, extra spark plugs and a repair manual. I made one final stop at a store not on my list, a liquor store. Not being much of a drinking man, I didn't get much, just an assortment of liquor and mixes and two cases of beer.

"Ready to go?"

"You're forgetting something."

"I got everything on my list."

"You didn't get the meat cutting equipment."

"I forgot about that. Any ideas?"

"All the stores with meat departments should have about the same equipment. Let's try the Safeway, it's as good as any."

Safeway had two band saws, a grinder, tenderizers, a slicer, knives, extra saw blades and except for the band saw, it was all easy to load aboard the trailer. I ended up using a pallet jack and some rope to move the band saw outside. Then, I detached the trailer from the pickup and while Molly held the tongue up, slid the saw onto the trailer.

"Is that it, or am I forgetting something else?"

"We didn't locate a corn sheller. That's enough for today, Jack. We can come back for the sheller. As it is, we have several days worth of work installing what we got today and moving those farm tanks. Do you have the plumbing supplies you need to hook up the propane tanks?"

"I have some odds and ends, but I won't really know until they're set in place. We can always come back. We have to find the sheller and a dump truck to haul the coal."

"Let's go home."

When we got home, I got the tractor and loader and set the tank cradles down, trying to make sure they were lined up. I set the tanks in place and that chore was done, other than connecting the tanks and filling them. Next, I set up our meat department in the pole barn. Andy had unloaded the chainsaws and put them in the pole barn too. Once I had emptied the trailer, he put the gas drums and cans in the trailer.

"Where do you want this box, dad?"

In The Aftertime – Chapter 7

"The liquor? I suppose it can go in the pole barn and the beer in the basement."

It was time to wash up for supper and rather than create the impression that I drank a lot, I skipped my cold beer and settled for coffee. I was a little sensitive on the drinking issue because of my father. You did notice that when I talked about learning to shoot, etc., I mentioned my grandfather and not my father? My father was a drunk who got drunk one night and drove the car through a red light, killing 3 people including him. Luck of the draw, I guess, usually the drunk survives. My mother had packed a bag and taken off several months before. My grandmother was dead and my grandfather died a couple of years after Nancy and I got married.

Molly put together chili for supper, very much to my liking. While I showered, she sat down at the computer and began looking over the food inventory program. It was sadly out of date and when I returned to the living room, she announced that we needed to find time to do an inventory, once the garden was in.

"Jack, we forgot to look for more jars and lids."

"Molly, start a list for me and as I have time, I'll try and find those things. Tomorrow, I'll figure out what it takes to plumb in the propane and try to get that hooked up. I'll need you to drop me off so I can drive a propane delivery truck back. When I have that done, Andy and I will start moving the farm tanks. Then, after we finish that, I see about filling the coal room with coal. I might even stack some to eliminate further trips."

"Don't forget to look for a wood stove for the kitchen."

"Add it to the list."

From the looks of the propane storage tanks at the dealer's, it would be some time before we had to resort to using a wood burning stove. On the other hand, it couldn't hurt to humor Molly. If nothing else, we could set the wood burning stove up in the pole barn and use it for canning to avoid overheating the house. Molly also pointed out that once we had the corn shelled, we could burn the cobs in the furnace. We would need to do some rearranging. Anything that freezing could hurt needed to go in the basement and things that it didn't matter could go into the pole barn. That would be a good time to take that inventory she talked about. Molly had taken to calling the dog we found at the other farm, *dog* and he didn't seem to mind.

o

The next morning, I took measurements and headed to town to get the installation supplies from the propane dealer's shop. I had it hooked up by noon and after lunch, she dropped me off so I could drive back a propane delivery truck. I topped off the truck and drove to the farm to fill the tanks. With that done, Andy and I went to the farm where the

tank had the least gas and drained it into the drums. We used his loader to put the tank on the trailer and returned home. I measured out enough PRI-G for 300 gallons of gas (slightly over a pint) and emptied the gas into the tank. I figured there was just enough time before dark to get the second tank and we set off again.

It took longer to drain the second tank and this guy's loader didn't work as well, maybe it needed some hydraulic fluid. However, we got the tank back to the farm and set it. We used the gas to top off the first tank, added PRI-G to the second tank and finally the remaining gas. That was a good day's work and tonight we were going to finish off the chili. At least she hadn't baked corn bread. Instead she had 4 loaves of white bread and one loaf of French bread. It was good, too.

"I'm going to start planting the garden tomorrow in raised beds. You need to find time to till an area for the potatoes, corn, green beans and so forth. Why don't you get the last farm tank tomorrow, top it off and I'll drive you to town to pick up a load of coal? If you can get the tilling done by the end of the week, we should be in good shape. We still need that wood stove, canning jars, another pressure canner and to take that inventory."

"Slave driver."

"I am not."

"Do you realize that we have been on a dead run every since we met? Even God took a day off every seven days."

"I'm sorry, Jack. There is so much to do; however, the list is getting shorter. Once we tie up a few loose ends, we should be able to take it easy. Gave it another month and we should be ready for come what may."

"That's about the time the garden will start coming in. It looks to me like it's going to be a very long summer."

"There's an upside you know. We haven't had to fight of hoards of MZBs."

"What is an MBZ?"

"Mutant Zombie Biker. Shorthand for the bad guys, like those three we killed before I met you."

"Oh. We were preppers, not really what you would call hard core survivalists."

"You knew enough to secure the firearms right off the bat. That shows that you have a survivalist mentality, like it or not."

"I considered that Molly and concluded since there would be other survivors, I didn't

want those weapons to be used against me."

"And yet, you came to town, bold as brass, and yelled out, *Hello, is anybody there?*"

"I was getting very tired of being alone. You surprised me too, getting in behind me with that shotgun. Pretty poor situational awareness."

"Well, at least you know the language."

"I still have a lot to learn."

"We both do. If we combine our skill sets, we should be ok."

o

The following day, we slept in a little later, we still needed the same amount of sleep and we were on our honeymoon. I was still trying to get used to being remarried. After a leisurely breakfast, Andy and I set off to get the third farm tank. With our late start and the fact that the tank contained almost 250 gallons, that took a while. When it was set and the gas used to top off the second tank, we had about 3 drums of gas. That called for roughly a half pint of PRI-G, but I went ahead and put in the full measure, Intending to get three drums of gas from the truck stop. After lunch, Andy and I got the gas, topped off the third tank and I got out my tiller to prepare the garden plot. It was nearly dark by the time I finished and I was hot and tired. I took a quick shower before supper, lest the stink ruin dinner.

"Your garden plot is tilled. We have the three farm tanks set up and filled. Do you want me to go get the coal tomorrow?"

"Why don't you do a light day, Jack. Look around town for canning jars and lids. See if you can find a wood burning stove. Maybe have a look in the Yellow Pages and see if you can spot the corn sheller. Andy can help me and we'll work on the garden. We should be able to get most of it planted. I'm sorry if I've run you ragged. There is so much to do and so little time."

"We have a whole lifetime Molly."

"And then what? Unless we locate additional survivors, Andy is going to be very alone when we're gone. He needs a companion, preferably female."

"What do you think the odds are of finding a female his age?"

"I didn't say she had to be the same age, just female. Hopefully of child bearing years."

"I can see it now; Andy married with children older than he is."

"It's funny when you put it that way. I guess I had in mind a smaller age difference."

"What, a college girl?"

"Or, a girl in High School."

"That would make sense. She might get bored waiting for him to get past puberty."

"She could be younger, too. Then, he'd be the one waiting."

Let's face it, if mankind is going to survive, things like those we discussed were a real consideration. That got me to thinking and I decided that not only would I look for the things Molly mentioned; I look around for additional survivors. That could present a challenge. As far as young children went, their parents probably taught them not to get into a car with a stranger. Older children, especially girls, would be very suspicious, no doubt having some of the same thoughts Molly had. This could call for real diplomacy.

o

I first started looking for canning jars. I checked the groceries, including their back rooms, and then started to go house to house. Man, can you imagine how many households there are in a town population 25,000? If one assumes 2.5 persons per house, 10,000. I think I've just found a new career, house checker. I decided to avoid apartments and focus first on older homes, presumably occupied by older citizens. My reasoning was that they were most likely the people who would be canning.

At the end of a very long day, I had accumulated roughly 300 jars, dozens of boxes of lids and another 41 quart canner. I also located a wood burning kitchen stove in a garage and I had only skimmed the surface of the volume of houses. I was going to need help or something to load that stove, it was iron and appeared to be very heavy. However, it should make Molly happy, as should the jars. I hadn't seen another living soul so Andy was going to have to learn to be patient.

"How did it go?"

"About 300 jars, lids and a large canner. Didn't find any survivors."

"Where did you look?"

"The grocery stores and then a group of older homes. As this rate, I should have all the jars you'd want in about a week."

"You can look again tomorrow, but the day after is Sunday, so why don't we take the day off?"

"Sounds good to me. There will still be the chores to do, but Andy and I can knock them

out in no time."

"The bull bred the milk cow so we're going to have milk one of these days and our first calf."

"Good, that powdered stuff barely cuts it."

"Speaking of which, I'm late."

"Late for what?"

"Think about it."

"Oh, you mean..."

"Yes. When you're in town tomorrow, stop by a pharmacy and pick me up a couple of test kits."

"This is a surprise. I guess we'll need to go shopping and pick you up some maternity wear."

"I already have it. That was what was in the bags from the day Andy and I went shopping."

"You are quite the schemer."

"I prefer to look at it as being practical. You Tarzan, me Jane; it was inevitable. I figured that either we got together or it would turn out badly. I like you Jack, more than you know. I didn't come into your bedroom without careful consideration. Plus I needed some loving."

"Do you? Do you love me?"

"Let's just say that you're growing on me, but yes, I think I might be in love with you."

"I hadn't given it a lot of thought, but I'll admit, the feeling is mutual."

To my way of thinking, there are three kinds of love between a man and a woman. The first is the infatuation or lust. Next is the sexual relationship and finally the commitment. I once read that a leading expert in the topic of love, divided the experience of love into three partly-overlapping stages: lust, attraction, and attachment. Lust exposes people to others, romantic attraction encourages people to focus their energy on mating, and attachment involves tolerating the spouse long enough to rear a child into infancy. We were beginning to move from the sexual attraction to the commitment stage. These things develop slowly and are best left to develop in their own time and at their own

pace.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 8

With her announcement came a whole new set of responsibilities. They were the same, yet different. And then it occurred to me, what did I know about delivering a baby? Just short of breaking out in a cold sweat, it occurred to me that women had been having babies since who knows when, surely long before there were doctors. There were probably books in the library that would give me a head start. And, since this wasn't her first baby, some of the normal complications might be avoided.

The next morning I was off at the crack of dawn, intent of finding more jars and lids than I had the previous day. While I had worried out loud about Molly working in the garden, she assured me that it wouldn't be a problem and that she didn't seem to be particularly prone to morning sickness. I was doing rather well and by lunch time had close to 200 jars. I ate my sack lunch and started out to do another 50 or so houses.

"Hello, anybody there?" My usual rap before I tried to force a door. With no response, I went in and began to look around.

"Hold it right there mister. What do you think you're doing?"

"I am looking for canning jars, ma'am."

"Put that rifle on the floor along with any other guns you may have."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Turn around."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You don't look like the sort to be a thief."

"Actually, I'd prefer to think of it as salvage. My wife, son and I are raising a garden and we needed jars to can our produce."

"Wife, you say? Mighty strange that a man and wife would have the same immunity gene."

"We weren't married then. My wife and her husband died. We came across each other and ended up married."

"Like there's a preacher still alive to marry you."

"We did exchange vows. Please don't shoot me, I just found out last night that she's expecting. Do you have enough food? Is there anything I can get you from our supplies?"

"Slow down, mister, let me think this thing through. What's your wife's name?"

"Molly."

"And your son?"

"Andy."

"Is he from her marriage or yours?"

"Hers."

"Where do you live?"

"On an acreage about 8 miles out of town."

"Big place?"

"Only 20 acres."

"Livestock?"

"Cattle, horses, poultry and hogs."

"Jan, honey, come out here."

A young girl, probably around 13-14 appeared in a doorway. She was holding a single shot shotgun, the same as the older woman. If they were related, my guess would be grandmother – granddaughter.

"What's your name?"

"John Brown."

"Can you prove that John Brown?"

"I have my driver's license. Why do you need proof?"

"If you are who you say you are, you're one step closer to establishing some credibility. You already admitted that you were looting to help out your family."

"Salvaging. Looting is taking something that you don't need for the sake of having it. Salvaging is taking abandoned property where the owner is unlikely to come back and need it."

"It's still stealing."

"Yes, I can see how you'd feel that way. So, let me ask, do you have any Mason jars or lids you can spare?"

"I have lots, some full, some empty."

"Would you like to move out to our acreage?"

"Is it safe out there?"

"Can't say. It has to be a lot better than living in town. The CDC said that about one tenth of one percent of the population was immune. For a city this size, that means roughly 25 people survived. If you count me as one and Molly and Andy as two and three. If you count the three men she killed when they tried to rape her as four, five and six, that means that you ladies are numbers seven and eight. Twenty-five minus eight means there could still be around seventeen people here in town."

"She killed three men you say?"

"Either she or Andy did, she never really said."

"But, she didn't kill you?"

"True, but I didn't try to rape her either. She had me cold, much as you do, a 12 gauge pointed at my back. I only told her the truth and that was enough to convince her not to shoot me. I'd say that it worked out rather well."

"It might be a good idea for us to come out there, do you have enough room?"

"We have one spare bedroom with a double bed."

"That should do for now. Ok, you can pick up your guns and come with me. I show you where the jars and canned goods are in the basement. Jan, you pack a bag and limit it to work clothes, like jeans and such."

"She might want to bring one dress, for Sunday dinners."

"You heard the man. One dress."

"Ok grandma."

That answered a question I hadn't asked. Sometimes if a person just listens, there is a wealth of information to be gained. For example, I knew the relationship, I knew that the woman canned, which meant that she had a canner. Plus people who can usually store a bit of food, frequently bought on sale, to store until they need it. Call it a rule of thumb.

"I see you hit a few sales at the grocery store."

"Well, food is cheaper if you buy it on sale. They usually switch the loss leader from week to week and over time you can get most of what you eat on sale. With the price of foods recently, every penny counted."

"I don't mean to be rude, but are you a city girl or a farm girl?"

I think calling her a girl, wasn't the worst decision I've ever made.

"City girl now, born, raised and lived on a farm most of my life. How did you know to ask?"

"Honestly, just a hunch. City folks seem to go to the store every day to buy what they want to eat for dinner that night."

"I have a large freezer."

"Really? How large?"

"Twenty-five."

"Empty or full?"

"Almost full to the top. How do you propose to move the frozen goods?"

"Is your freezer new or old?"

"Old, why?"

"How about we go salvage a new 25 foot freezer and transfer the frozen goods to it? I have a generator with me to power it."

"You go get one and we'll get our bags packed and start moving things upstairs."

"I'll be back in about one hour. You didn't tell me your name."

"Wilson. Nancy Wilson."

"Like the singer?"

"I couldn't carry a tune in a basket."

"You granddaughter, is her last name Wilson?"

"Birch. Janice Birch."

I got the freezer out of the box and set on the trailer. Then, I powered up the generator so it could cool off. By the time I got back, there were suitcases on the front porch together with several boxes of empty canning jars. We started to haul the meat up to the new freezer and that turned out to be quite a chore. That's twenty-five cubic feet. We nearly filled the trailer with empty jars and I had to crowd some to get all of her food into the bed of the pickup. I just made it; we wouldn't have to come back.

We drove out to the farm and I parked the pickup next to the pole barn. I led the ladies to the house to meet Molly and Andy. I noticed right off that Jan didn't seem to be particularly interested in Andy and attributed it in part to the age difference. Isn't it strange how much 3 years means when you're young and how little it means as you grow older? Nancy and Molly struck up a conversation and it was if I had ceased to exist. Andy and I went out to unload the pickup and trailer. After emptying the boxes from the trailer, I used the loader to move the freezer into the pole barn. It still ran when I plugged it back in, so I don't think I hurt it. Finally I moved the pickup to the house and Andy and I took the canned goods to the basement using the outside entrance.

The basement was beginning to fill up. I hoped there would be enough room for the produce we canned this year. Plus, I might have to get a third freezer if we butcher much this fall. First, I had to get that woodstove from the garage that I'd found. Am I wrong, or is my list just getting longer? I believe that I had taken the last 25 foot freezer from the store so, I might have to recover Nancy's freezer. I just occurred to me, her first name was the same as my late wife's. Coincidence?

I noticed at supper that Jan was very quiet. I couldn't distinguish if she was just being quiet or was sullen. The poor girl had been through a lot since the illness hit and I assumed it would be better to let her come around in her own time. While Molly and Nancy jabbered away, I ate my beef stew and remained quiet. When dinner wound down, I excused myself and went upstairs to take a shower. I realized that this was the last bar of soap and made a mental note to add soap and cleaning supplies to my ever growing list.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't ignoring you. It was nice to have a new person to visit with."

"What's with Jan? Did Nancy say why she is sullen? Maybe she's just quiet, but I somehow thought otherwise."

"No, you hit the nail on the head. Her mother was Nancy's daughter and that's how the immunity was passed. First, her father died from the illness and then her mother was killed in a holdup of a pharmacy. Some gangster kid came into the pharmacy with a handgun and when she didn't give him the drugs fast enough to suit him, he shot her. With all the deaths we've had, this was just tragedy on top of tragedy. Nancy said she's coming around, but it's a steep hill she's climbing."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 9

"We're up to about 700 jars. I found 200 before I ran into Nancy and she had another 200. Tomorrow, I plan to go after the wood stove and get it set up in the shed. I'll keep looking for jars, of course. And, I may move Nancy's old freezer out here."

"How did she keep it going?"

"Darned if I know, I didn't think to ask. She has to have a generator."

"I believe that we may be able to get by with about 1,000 jars, so you don't need to find that many more. Lids are a separate issue. I'm not sure how long they last. We could vacuum pack them, but that may or may not make a difference. They have a date on them, so we'll use up the oldest first. Anyway, you're not going anywhere tomorrow, it's Sunday, remember?"

"No, I didn't, it completely slipped my mind. Still, I'd feel better if we got that woodstove tomorrow and Nancy's freezer. We can try to find more jars and lids and that should have me down to hauling the coal. I can take a day off and then start hauling coal."

"Come here you, I have something to show you."

o

And, show me she did, but that's an entirely different story. The next morning over breakfast, we had a discussion about going back to town, getting the wood stove and Nancy's freezer, looking for more jars and lids and simply trying to bring closure to some open issues. After some discussion, it was decided to leave Andy and Jan on the acreage and the three adults would make the trip to town. Nancy asked me what I had in the way of firearms and I told her about anything she wanted. She asked for an open sighted .308 bolt action and a .45 caliber pistol. She insisted that for the moment, the factory sighting was good enough. I got her a Remington BDL and a Springfield Armory GI .45.

On the way to town, Nancy had some ideas about where to look for jars and lids. She was ticking off a list of friends that canned and probably had lots of jars. First, we stopped at the garage and cussed the woodstove onto the trailer. Next we went to Nancy's and put her freezer and portable generator in the bed of the pickup. Finally, we started hitting her friends' homes and eventually ran out of room for jars.

"Let's go unload what we have and come back," Nancy suggested. "I sure we can get many more jars and I have one friend that had some kind of long life lid."

Unloading the stove was as simple as backing the trailer into the pole barn, attaching a chain and driving slowly forward. It slid off onto a sheet of plywood so I could move it later. Then, we unloaded the jars and lids and finally I used the loader to set the freezer off the pickup. We had lunch and headed back to town to finish our search for jars and

lids.

"You are going to need stove pipe, you know."

"I thought as much Nancy, but I'll have time once we have the jars and lids. That will leave my only major chore of hauling coal from the power plant."

"What's that for, your furnace?"

"The stove and hot water heater use propane. I figured to do the major canning operation in the pole barn."

"Did you put in running water and waste disposal in the pole barn?"

"No. I could run a water pipe from the well, though. I suppose it would mean drilling a hole in the floor, but the concrete isn't all that thick. It's doable."

"Just seems to me that if you were planning on doing the canning in the pole barn, you would have thought ahead."

"Sorry, I'm a bit new to this and still have a lot to learn. I make mistakes, but I rarely repeat them."

"Seems to me from what you said that's twice you let a woman get the drop on you."

"You don't see any bullet holes do you?"

"I didn't say you couldn't be charming. One of these days you're going to run into a woman who just plain doesn't like men. Either because of her orientation or because some man did her wrong."

"We need to make another stop."

"Where, honey?"

"At the Police Station, Molly. I think maybe I'd better pick up some armor. They have some SWAT gear, unless I'm mistaken."

"Is that what we're going to be reduced to? Wearing armor and going armed 24/7?"

"Only when we go into a town or city. You recall I told you I got at shot when I went to the Capital."

"Your Suburban, huh?"

"Right. If I had turned left instead of right, I'd have driven right to the shooter."

"Might just as well take all they have, John. Jan might feel better if she had body armor."

"Speaking of Jan, is she going to be ok?"

"They say that time heals all wounds and wounds all heels, so I think so. Her problem at the moment is not having anyone her own age to pal around with."

"There's not that much difference in age between Andy and Jan."

"At their age, it might as well be 50 years. It might be different if he were the older of the two, given the difference in the way that boys and girls mature. However, she's 13 going on 20 and he's still a 10-year-old boy."

Don't Cry Joni

*Woman: Jimmy please say you'll wait for me
I'll grow up someday you'll see
Saving all my kisses just for you
Signed with love forever true*

*Man: Joni was the girl who lived next door
I've known her I guess 10 years or more
Joni wrote me a note one day
And this is what she had to say*

*Woman: Jimmy please say you'll wait for me
I'll grow up someday you'll see
Saving all my kisses just for you
Signed with love forever true*

*Man: Slowly I read her note once more
Then I went over to the house next door
Her tear drops fell like rain that day
When I told Joni what I had to say*

*Man: Joni, Joni please don't cry
You'll forget me by and by
You're just fifteen
I'm twenty two
And Joni I just can't wait for you*

*Man: Soon I left our little home town
Got me a job and tried to settle down
But these words kept haunting my memory
The words that Joni said to me*

*Woman: Jimmy please say you'll wait for me
I'll grow up some day you'll see
Saving all my kisses just for you
Signed with love forever true*

*Man: I packed my clothes
And I caught a plane
I had to see Joni
I had to explain
How my heart was filled
With her memory
And ask my Joni if she'd marry me*

*I ran all the way
To the house next door
But things weren't like they were before
My tear drops fell like rain that day
When I heard what Joni had to say*

*Woman: Jimmy, Jimmy please don't cry
You'll forget me by and by
It's been five years since you've been gone
Jimmy I married your best friend John
Conway Twitty and his daughter Joni*

I just put that in to remind you that this isn't a unique experience. As long as there have been men and women of different ages, we'll have the Jimmy and Joni's, the Jan and Andy's. That won't change even if the world just ended, or seemed to. In life, we have choices but sometimes, they're very limited. It can be as simple as yes or no, have or do without. But then again, life is short of being perfect. Conway Twitty died in 1993, but the female singer on the record was his daughter Joni Lee Jenkins. His name was Harold Lloyd Jenkins.

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We cleaned out the Police Station of anything useful. Then, we got the remaining jars and lids before we returned home. At least Andy and Jan were talking to each other when we got back. It wasn't much, mostly courtesy, but it had to start somewhere. Keep in mind that we haven't finished checking out the town and there could be another seventeen people there. And the state? Maybe 2,000 give or take. That left Jan a lot of potential candidates.

The next chore beyond getting coal was washing the jars so all we had to do was sterilize them when we canned. Depending on how many jars we had, we could freeze all

the beef or can some. Molly said canned beef is very tasty and it lets you throw together a quick meal. Pressure cook some veggies add a jar of canned beef, simmer.

Pressure canning is the **ONLY SAFE METHOD** for canning meat.

All meat should be handled carefully to avoid contamination from the time of slaughtering until the products are canned. Animals should be correctly slaughtered, canned promptly or kept under refrigeration until processed. If you slaughter your own meat, contact your local county agricultural agent for complete information on slaughtering, chilling, and aging the meat.

Keep meat as cool as possible during preparation for canning, handle rapidly, and process meat as soon as it is packed. Most meats need only be wiped with a damp cloth. Use lean meat for canning; remove most of the fat. Cut off gristle and remove large bones. Cut into pieces convenient for canning.

To prepare broth, place bony pieces in saucepan and cover with cold water. Simmer until meat is tender. Discard fat. Add boiling broth to jars packed with precooked meat and poultry.

Meat should not be browned with flour nor should flour be used in the broth to make gravy for pouring over the packed meat. Pack hot meat loosely, leaving 1-inch headspace in Mason jars.

Meats may be processed with or without salt. If salt is desired, use only pure canning salt. Table salt contains a filler which may cause cloudiness in bottom of jar. Use ½ teaspoon salt to each pint, 1 teaspoon to each quart. More or less salt may be added to suit individual taste.

Follow step-by-step directions for your pressure canner. Process meats according to the following recipes.

When canning food in regions less than 2,000 feet altitude (dial gauge canner) or 1,000 feet altitude (weighted gauge canner @ 15#), process according to specific recipe. When canning food in regions above 2,000 feet altitude (dial gauge canner) or 1,000 feet altitude (weighted gauge canner), process according to the following chart.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 10

I could eat rabbits, but let me ask, if you had to choose between rabbit and filet mignon, what would you choose? Rabbit might be good to break the monotony, but we have chicken, ducks, turkeys, pork and beef. You will excuse me, I hope, if I don't get all worked up over rabbits. I did locate and relocate a beehive for two reasons. First, it provided honey and second, those nasty little bugs pollinated our crops. Not all of them of course, the ones that stung me didn't make it. And then, there are those ducks. I don't like duck, too greasy.

"I'm going to start hauling coal tomorrow. I should be able to get a dump truck at the city yard and a front loader to load it."

"Do you want me to drop you off?"

"If it's a five yard truck, I'll only need one load tomorrow and can drive the pickup home. I'll go for as many days as it takes to stack up enough for 4-5 years. Eventually, I'll need another front loader here to move it from the pile to the coal chute. There plenty of time to do that."

"The coal they use at the power plant isn't the same as what you are used to burning. You'd better plan on having extra if you expect the same energy output."

"What's the difference, coal is coal."

"What kind of coal did you buy?"

"Anthracite."

"The power company uses Bituminous. Couldn't you tell the difference?"

"No Molly, I couldn't. It looked black to me."

"True, but it wasn't shiny. That's the only reason I knew, it wasn't shiny black. You can check it out at the library if you don't believe me."

"No, I believe you; I just didn't know the difference. I'll adjust by bringing another load or two of coal out here, will that work?"

"I don't see why not. Another thing you need to think about is gathering wood for the stove in the pole barn and that chimney."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"We'll go look for a standing dead tree. They usually make the best firewood. If we can get two or three, we'll find a wood splitter and the kids can split the logs down to stove

size."

"If I hadn't met you, I'd be running around in dirty clothes, living on macaroni and cheese and sitting up half the night watching old movies on TV."

"Probably. Do you like what you have now better?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Is that multiple questions or a single question?"

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We had our moments and we had our other moments. So far, we'd managed to avoid any major fights. I hauled 25 yards of coal out to the farm and since I don't know how much a yard of coal weighs, let's assume about 20 tons. Coal is usually measured either by the number of BTUs in a given volume or by the weight as in ton on metric ton. Trying to figure out how much I had by the volume would have been easy if I'd have just thought to weight the truck loaded and empty. I was loading 5 1-yard scoops per truck-load so it wouldn't have been that difficult. It turns out that one cubic foot of coal weighs on the average 50 pounds. Therefore one cubic yard is about 1,350 pounds. [Hint: anything you want to know is out there if you ask the correct question]

After I got that information, I realized that I had less than 17 tons of coal. Yep, Ernie was right, I'd loaded 16 tons of #9 coal. I spent another week making the pile bigger. I no more than finished up than Molly was chomping at the bit about my harvesting firewood. It seems that the garden was growing very well and it wouldn't be long before they started canning. I got a can of red spray paint and we went around and marked standing dead trees. Another project and my butt was already beginning to drag.

This is all well and good, but I've never used a chainsaw before. My first step was to read the instructions. My next step was to assemble the saw using the longest blade. I also assembled the second saw with the shortest blade so I had one for the trunk and a second to do the limbing. Yeah, I looked it up in the dictionary. And I figured while I was at it, I'd get the splitter before I got the timber so once the timber was down on the farm, I could stay home for a while.

Of course the trees Molly picked were dead hardwoods. I had it in mind that the saw would zip right through them, but no, I had to work at it. Maybe it was only a few extra minutes, but given my preconception, it seemed like forever. I didn't see anyone around so I didn't bother yelling Timber. Had there been anyone around, I'm sure the noise from the chainsaw would have brought them running.

That's when I realized that this was not a task I should be doing alone. What if the saw brought someone to me and I was concentrating on cutting the tree? What if the tree fell wrong and ended up on top of me? Oops. I needed to go home and get Andy and he could keep an eye out while I was limbing the tree and loading it into the pickup and trailer.

"Did you get the tree down?"

"Yes, I did. That's when it occurred to me that I shouldn't have gone alone. I need someone to watch my back while I'm busy playing with the chainsaw."

"I can come."

"You could. I had Andy in mind because it would pump up his self esteem and he'd probably keep a real good lookout."

"Why don't we both come?"

"Are you sure it's ok for you to be doing that?"

"You didn't ask me that when I was hauling the wet laundry out to the line and hanging it up."

"Oh. You're right of course. Why don't Andy and you get your guns and we'll go cut up the tree?"

"I can't help loving a man who knows his place."

"Say what?"

"Nothing."

I heard her, but I took it as her sense of humor. If I had thought she was serious, we'd have had a word or two about that. It's all right to fight because after, you get to kiss and makeup. Plus, if you never fight, you have no idea what she is going to hit you with, figuratively, when you do. *Maybe, I saw you looking long and hard at Jan, or What's with you and Nancy?* It may not be true, but I think they sometimes hit you with things like that just to see what you will say. The correct answer is to pretend you're Sgt. Schultz and you know nothing. Any other answer is easily misconstrued.

Let me give you an example. A young lady named Jan has recently moved to your house. She sits across from you at the dinner table. You've noticed that this teen is starting to become a woman and her chest is filling. Noticed. You didn't gawk, you didn't comment, but she sits right across the table from you. So when your wife says something like, *I saw you looking long and hard at Jan*, you might have an involuntary reaction because you noticed. Nothing. I know nothing!

"Ready?"

"Sure let's go. Andy have his gun?"

"He's not coming. He wants to stay here and make sure Jan and Nancy are ok."

Did I miss something? Probably. Molly sat in the truck to keep an eye out and I cut the limbs off the tree. Then I cut the brush off the limbs and began loading limbs into trailer. It didn't take long for it to fill because the wood wasn't really straight. I finished up putting the remaining limbs in the pickup and tying them down. I still had time, so I took the long saw and started to cut the trunk into 12" sections, as instructed. When I had that done, I hefted some of the smaller sections into the pickup and trailer as well. I hadn't realized how heavy this hardwood was. Better I come back tomorrow when I'm fresh to try lifting the heavier pieces.

"I'll bet you think that you have a lot of wood."

"Actually, I do."

"Yes, but wait until it's split, the pile will be much smaller."

"True, but there's a lot of dead space in the trailer and the pickup."

"So you didn't just fall off the turnip truck?"

"Nothing, I know nothing!"

"You're supposed to save that until I accuse you of looking at Jan's expanding chest."

"I noticed, but it's nothing to me. I wonder if maybe Andy noticed too." (Plan B)

"Why would you say that?"

"He volunteered to stay and keep an eye on Jan and Nancy?"

"Yeah, huh?"

o

I'll skip a few details because all I'd tell you was how I brought back the remainder of the tree then spent some time splitting and stacking it. And how Molly and I went after tree number 2 and tree number 3. We ended up with all the firewood we'd need for the immediate future. I even had enough that I could keep a fire in the wood stove and keep the pole barn warm. Plus, I got a stovepipe installed.

Surely there had to be more people in town because we hadn't cleaned out the grocery stores and there was ample food. If people knew to look around, there was everything necessary to sustain life. I left generators we didn't need sitting in the stores, some with fuel in their tanks. I reasoned that the best time to identify any survivors might be when it cooled off and I/we could see the steam or smoke coming from chimneys. Molly didn't

agree, but at three months she was just beginning to show. I attributed that to her slim figure.

At first, she switched to those jeans with the flexible panel and a looser top. Other than her top not being tucked in, there wasn't much to notice. However, as time passed, her belly filled and I began to notice she had a little more up front, in a manner of speaking. Of course, Jan continued to mature and I noticed that around his 11th birthday Andy developed a frog in his throat. It was time to sit down and have a serious discussion about this birthing process. I'd gone to the library and gotten a couple of books but it seemed to me that I was far better suited to making babies than delivering them.

From what I could tell, a straight forward delivery was mostly a matter of catching the baby as it delivered. However, there was the section on breech delivery and so on and I wasn't sure about that. Molly's first delivery had been conventional and she said that she seriously doubted that this birth would require a section. That's good, because I wasn't about to cut her open. Nancy said she'd assisted in Jan's birth and had a good idea of what needed to be done. I needed to be there because it was a better if both parents experienced the birth. I'll worry about that in 5 months.

With the canning done, I was waiting to harvest the potatoes, squash and other late crops. I had two hogs and one beef picked out for slaughter come November. We had already begun to thin the flocks and add them to the freezer. I even took a day off and Andy, Jan and I went fishing. We should have a well balanced diet over the winter. While I was waiting for the crops, I began the inventory and put it on pads. Molly took the pads and entered the data into the computer.

Back when I went to the pharmacy to get the pregnancy tests, I broke into the locked part of the pharmacy and picked up the antibiotics I was familiar with, cough syrups, pain killers and so forth. I also took two of the fancy first aid kits and extra bandages because there are some things you can never have too much of. Toilet paper comes to mind and women's products.

Brave new world? Well, it's certainly different, but I'm not particularly brave. The upside of this kind of disaster is that there are so few people left that war seems to be beyond consideration. Big wars, anyway. I estimated that we could have about 2,000 survivors in this state and 300,000 nationally. That's enough people for a local war but why fight? There is all the property a person could ever want free for the taking. They are plenty of canned goods in the stores. The gasoline and diesel fuel didn't evaporate from all of the station tanks. There isn't any logical reason why someone would want to start a war.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 11

That said, what is logical about war? I'll be honest here, I can't think of a single thing about war that is totally logical. It occurs to me that if you have something and the other guy doesn't, he might be inclined to take what you have instead of producing or finding his own. Those people must be the MZBs that Molly mentioned. I've never really thought of myself as a survivalist, only as a prepper. She might be right though, the first thing I did was secure the guns.

All of this was food for thought because we still hadn't searched the city to see if there were any other survivors. As I said, I wanted to wait for winter and check for signs of smoke or steam. Our winters were cold enough to require heat and heat meant steam or smoke. With the natural gas gone, I was thinking of people burning wood or coal in fireplaces or older furnaces. If I recall correctly the Bible says, *To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven*. Plus I didn't want to be away from home when I became a new father.

I noticed that Jan and Andy had morphed into a relationship one might describe as brother-sister. Nancy had assumed the grandmother role for all of us, sharing her accumulated knowledge and helping us past stumbling blocks. I knew better than ask, but I took her to be in her 50s. She hadn't said and we hadn't asked. She took over baking the bread and she did something different that made the texture better. I think she was adding gluten, but I'm not sure, it could have been lecithin.

We hadn't set up security for the farm but dog would let us know if anyone showed up. We went out to the pasture and practiced for a while each month so if that day came, we'd be able to use the weapons effectively. In our state the central National Guard ammo distribution point was a military camp northwest of the Capital. I considered driving down there to see what I could pick up, but that meant going in harms way and it didn't have a high priority. BTW, that in harms way is a John Paul John quote who said, *I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast, for I intend to go in harm's way*. John Wayne's line from the movie was, *A fast ship going in harm's way – a lousy situation, Commander Eddington*.

One day late in mid November, just before we were going to butcher, I got my gear around and drove into town. I parked on an overlook and glassed the whole area looking for that smoke or steam. I didn't see anything and gave up after an hour and returned home. At this point, I assumed there were no other survivors. I was wrong. It was my misfortune that the Dodge left a clear track in the snow on the roads. I was still an amateur. Had I taken a horse trailer and ridden a horse into town for the last 3-4 miles, I wouldn't have left those tracks.

Molly was in her seventh month and wasn't showing that much. I wasn't used to this and wondered if anything was wrong.

"Relax, Jack, Molly is doing just fine. So is the baby and at 36 weeks, we determine if

the baby in correctly placed for a normal deliver."

"And if it isn't?"

"We can manually rotate it. Any sooner and it might move back; any later and we might not be able to move it. You didn't say what you saw on your trip to town."

"Actually Nancy, I didn't see any sign of life. No steam, no smoke and nobody moving around that I could see. Any idea when we should start the butchering?"

"Let's wait until after Thanksgiving. We have a lot to be thankful this year. Did you assemble that smoke house from the plans I drew up for you?"

"No, but I think I can knock it out in about a half day. I don't have any hickory to burn for wood smoke."

"That easy, we can get hickory chips in town. We can look for a hickory tree and cut it down before the sap comes up."

"I don't know how to make hams or bacon."

"I'll show you, do you have pickling salt?"

"Didn't know I needed any."

"You can get it in town. I go along if you like and show you."

o

During some of our down time, I had installed those 4 CB radios, one in each of the two vehicles, one in the house and the final with a cigarette adapter plug and magnetic antenna base. I could use it in whatever vehicle I/we were driving at the moment. We also salvaged 4 pairs of FRS/GMRS radios from Radio Shack. I considered ham radio and decided that I didn't know enough about it to set it up. I did get a scanner and scanner antenna so we could listen.

Nancy and I butchered a turkey for Thanksgiving. She dried a loaf of bread for stuffing and produced cranberry sauce and canned yams from her stash. Not as elaborate as some years, but there was smashed potatoes, gravy, canned yams, stuffing, turkey, fresh bread and cranberry sauce. Molly was a little help and Jan helped her grandmother with most of the preparation. After dinner, Jan cornered Andy and they did the dishes. She was coming out of her earlier state and was visiting cordially with Andy.

"I'd forgotten this part."

"What part, Molly?"

"My back is killing me. Thank God it will be over in six weeks. Sure is strange."

"What's strange?"

"I don't know, everything, I guess. A year ago I was married to Andrew Brown, raising our son Andy, we were prepping for an emergency, and our only concern was him finding another welding job. We weren't really worried because construction welding is seasonal. We had a little money put away to tide us over until spring when construction resumed, were all healthy, not a care in the world. Then something so small you can't even see it came along and killed 99.9% of the population."

"And, now, you're Mrs. John Brown, 8 months pregnant, have more preps than you ever dreamed possible and still shouldn't have a care in the world."

"You can't say that Jack. We've been lucky because none of the other survivors know where we are or what we have. I know from personal experience that not all of the survivors are well intentioned. So do you, from your trip to the Capital."

"There doesn't seem to be anybody in town, I checked. I didn't see a sign of smoke or steam or anybody moving around."

"That's a mighty big assumption. What if they're using a portable generator to power an electric space heater? It's not like we removed all of the food and we didn't check a lot of homes, so they could have and come up with their own armory. Did it occur to you that you were leaving tracks in the snow leading right back to the farm?"

Another mistake not to repeat. The good news was that my day stretcher finally worked. With no crops growing, all of the loose ends tied up, a triple redundant source of power, coal and wood to burn, we were reduced to tending to the livestock. Nancy and I needed to make a trip to town for salt and could go the other way, maybe confusing that issue. Then there was the butchering, aging, cutting and wrapping. And, don't forget the hickory chips. Maybe I should go to the library and get a book on butchering. Maybe a quick in and out would be better.

o

"I was talking to Molly, Jack. I think our trip to town ought to be quick. She said something about you taking another way into town. That might be a good idea, throw any survivors off. I think it's likely that some of the survivors died off, leaving either the nasty people or the very determined. We should take dog with us, his hearing and eyesight are better. Ok, so when do you want to go?"

"We can leave just as soon as I finish digesting everything you said."

"Why's that?"

"I spent the better part of a day considering all those things."

"You're learning. You might make it after all. I've been thinking. Do you have a semi-auto rifle in .308?"

"There are 3 M1As, a Standard, a Loaded and the M25," I lied.

"Did you sight them in?"

"Yes, but only with the iron sights on the first two."

"You have magazines and ammo?"

"Just tell me which one you want, Nancy. I'll get you a full setup."

"The medium one."

"Ok, one Loaded model coming up."

"I assume it's like the Standard, except with extras?"

"Lots of extras, better sights, better trigger, better barrel and national match flashhider."

"Sighted at 6 o'clock or point of aim?"

"Point of aim."

"Don't forget the shotgun."

Women. It's hard to live with them and you can't live without them. I didn't tell her about the other M1As. The dealer had one of each basic model, a Standard, a Loaded, a National Match, a Super Match, an M21 Tactical and his personal M25. The M21 also sported a scope. It was more interesting what he didn't have; absent were the short barreled M1As, the Scout, the Socom 16 and the Socom II. However, in the collection I brought home were a pair LWRC short piston 6.8 Remington SPC carbines for CQB. I was perfectly happy with the HK91, the civilian version of the G3. Plus, I'm surrounded by women who know as much or more about firearms than I do.

"We'll hit the grocery stores for a quick in and out. I doubt they will have more than a cart or two each of picking salt. If you know where they shelve their charcoal, look for bags of hickory chips and get some charcoal while you're at it. Keep that fancy rifle of yours close, we might find some of those missing survivors."

The thing that occurred to me was why hadn't we gotten picking salt when we'd made pickles? Maybe Nancy had enough on hand to do the job? It took about 20 minutes in

each of the three stores to locate what we wanted and hump it out to the pickup. With driving time, we were only in town about 90 minutes. We didn't see a soul, but they saw us. That was twice I'd been in town and been seen and hadn't known it.

◦

We weren't badly off. Yeah, those people cleaned out some of the food from the stores, but they left enough we could eat, for now. There were seven of us, thrown together over time. There had been more, but they were dead, generally as a result of action we had to take to protect ourselves or our group. Those people had cleaned out the gun stores, forcing us to go house to house looking for sporting arms. We did better than just sporting arms, there were some survivalists with fancy gun collections and literally thousands of rounds of ammo.

We set up in a Church, using the Sunday School classrooms as bedrooms. We found a working generator, several in fact, and pumped fuel into drums to take back to the Church. We heated the bedrooms with electric space heaters and brought mattresses from a furniture store for sleeping. The Church had a large kitchen but there wasn't any gas for the stove. Coleman stoves that ran on unleaded solved that problem.

We'd collected food by the cart full, sometimes making 3-4 trips in a day. With 5 carts, it hadn't taken that long to fill an unheated school room with food. Those people overlooked so much. There were all kinds of baking mixes; mixes for white bread, corn bread, cookies, cakes, you name it. There were those individual meals that didn't need refrigeration and we got them all. They beat us to the canned hams and Spam, you know the stuff that doesn't need refrigeration. Still, we wouldn't go hungry anytime soon.

As near as we can tell, it was the same guy, but one time he came from one direction and others, he came from another. If I were to assume, I would assume that he lives out of town and doesn't want anyone to know where he lives. He's not alone, either. Early on, I saw him join up with a woman and a kid. Later, one of the others saw him with two women. What's he got, a harem? He has a lot of firepower, if we approach him, we'd better be very careful.

◦

Per Nancy's suggestion, we started with the hogs and we butchered four instead of two. She showed me how to cut up the meat, mostly using the band saw and Jan scraped the meat and Nancy wrapped. Lucky Andy got to haul it all to the freezer. We brined the bacon and hams and then hung them in the smoke house. Then, we killed the steer, skinned it and split it into two halves. Nancy said we could age it a few days and then break it into quarters and she'd teach me how to do the commercial cuts. We'd follow the same program, I'd cut, Jan would scrape (remove the 'saw dust'), Nancy would package/wrap and Andy would lug it to the freezer.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 12

I discussed the butchering with Molly and she told me to remember how to do the cutting. She would talk to Nancy and get the curing part down pat. When Andy was old enough to be around the band saw, I could teach him how to make the various cuts. I explained how Nancy had taken one of the four hogs and turned the loins into Canadian bacon and ground most of the hog up into sausage, except for the hams and slab bacon.

We wouldn't be short on ham or bacon. Nancy had a spice recipe for American sausage. The butchering filled in a few holes in our food supply, but overall, we had lots of frozen meat, 75 cubic feet give or take a little. Did I mention that we butchered several turkeys? We could have ham or turkey almost every Sunday, if we wanted. As near as I could tell, the steer yielded over 700 pounds of cut and wrapped meat. The hogs not only provided meat, we rendered a few gallons of lard. Or, should I define it by weight?

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Jake came in saying he'd found a set of tire tracks on the overlook and it appeared we could follow them out to that farm we assumed they lived on. We weren't looking for trouble, but if trouble comes looking for us, we'll be ready. We talked it over and decided it might go more smoothly if we had some kind of peace offering. To that end, we assembled a box of drugs from the pharmacies, some of the more exotic canned goods, spices and condiments, some liquor because I'd seen him take a box from a liquor store, some beer, although it was over age, all of which we packed in the back of the Dodge pickup we stole. We'd filled the tank using a generator to power a pump from an in town station. It ran rough, but it ran. I added some stabil, and it helped, but only a little.

We decided to leave the women here in town, well armed of course, and we three men would follow the tire tracks and see if we could locate their farm. Shouldn't be hard, I saw him hauling coal so there will be smoke. The problem I see is how to approach them and not get shot at. Like I said, they're well armed. Should we watch them after we locate them, or should we just barge in and yell, "Hello the house?" Carry guns, of course, but would it be better to have them slung or ready for action? I am, was, an accountant, what do I know about matters like this? There wasn't a draft and I didn't volunteer for the military so about all I know, is what little I picked up from hunting.

None of us had been in the military; we were just your average white and blue collar workers who worked, paid our bills and tried to get along. Then, this bug came along and killed off almost the entire population. I don't know what I expected the government to do, certainly more than they did. About all they'd been able to do was keep us informed and everyone died before they gave the illness a name. Some of us had some rare gene that provided immunity, about 0.1% they said. It was recessive but could be passed. We were three men, three women and one child. It hadn't been divided that even at first, the men outnumbering the women, but that's how it ended up.

"You ready to go?"

"No, but do we have a choice?"

"We could always stay in town Jake and wonder, but sooner or later the canned food will go bad and we'll have to do it anyway."

"Better now, while we have tracks to follow."

"You ready, Ralph?"

"No Jonas, I'm not. I never will be, let's do it and have done with it."

"We have that peace offering and after considerable thought on the subject, I suggest we keep our weapons none threatening, but ready for quick use."

"I won't keep my rifle slung."

"No, but you can keep it pointed down and your finger away from the trigger. That won't slow you down much and might signal that we mean them no harm."

"How can you say we mean them no harm until we know the facts, Jonas? What if he's holding those women as slaves or something?"

"Would you give a gun to a slave? I think not. They aren't slaves by any means, they've always been armed. He's been armed too, heck even the boy had a gun."

"Wasn't much of a gun."

"Not at first, no. Later on, he was carrying a Mini-14 and had a pistol in a holster."

"There's the tracks. See how easy they will be to follow?"

"You've been right so far, Ralph. Let's hope our luck holds."

o

"Ouch. Jack, go get Nancy. Tell her my labor has started."

"What do I do, boil water?"

"No silly, they just say that to keep the husband out of the way."

I got Nancy and she got Jan and they shooed me to the living room for the moment and told me to make sure the livestock was fed. That had been early this morning and Andy

and I had long since run out of chores to do. We were sitting at a card table assembling a large jig saw puzzle, something Nancy suggested. I was getting a running count about centimeters and when I asked, Nancy said the magic number was 10.

Nancy announced 10 about the time dog started barking something furious. I told Andy to get his coat and weapons, we might have trouble outside.

"Nancy, dog is barking something awful. We've got to go check on what's up."

"I heard, you go and we handle things here."

"You said I should be there."

"Come back if nothing is going on."

"Let's go, Andy."

Sitting in the driveway was a Dodge pickup with a load of something on the back. Loot? There were three armed men, I noticed they were pointing their weapons down and had their fingers off the triggers.

"I'm John Brown. Is there something I can do for you men?"

"Mr. Brown I'm Jonas Blaine. (But he didn't work for Allstate) The others are Ralph Norton (He's on a honeymoon, but is not a honeymooner) and Jacob Smith. We're from town and have seen you in there several times. There are seven of us altogether, three women and a child. We don't mean you any harm."

"As a sign of peace, fellas, I'm going to sling my rifle. If those are your intentions, why don't you do the same?"

They looked at each other and I thought I caught a quick nod from Jonas and soon all four of us had our weapons slung.

"Andy, sling your rifle."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, it doesn't had a sling. You forgot to give me one."

"Would you fellas like to come into the house? We were right in the middle of something very important and I really rather be there than out here in the cold."

"What's going on?"

"My wife is giving birth to a baby."

"No kidding, you have a wife plus three other women?"

"If you know about the women, the first one I hooked up with is my wife, now. My wife Nancy died in the illness."

"How about we unload the gifts we brought you?"

"Fine, but I'm going inside to see the baby come. Andy can help you out or keep an eye on you whichever you choose to think."

Actually I think that Andy did a bit of both, his Browning was in condition 1 and although he set the Mini-14 down, I'm sure he watched them like a hawk. The men carried everything into the kitchen and stacked it on the floor. Their rifles went into a corner and they found cups and poured themselves coffee, according to Andy. After my daughter was born and I took a minute to kiss Molly and greet my daughter, I returned to the kitchen.

"Did you have to take all of the coffee from town?"

"I tried to."

"You missed the whole beans, fortunately. However we ran out recently."

"No problem, how about a couple of cases of Yuban? Don't much care for it myself. What's all the stuff?"

"There is a box of pharmaceuticals, some of the more exotic canned goods, spices and condiments, some liquor and some old beer."

"How about I add some meat to the offering? I doubt you've had much beside canned meat for quite some time."

"That's sounds good. We've been living mostly out of cans. At least you left them."

"We mostly took Long Term Storage foods. We didn't bother with the shorter term stuff for two reasons. First, it wouldn't keep and second, I assumed there would be other survivors. The town had around 25,000 people and one-tenth of one percent is around twenty-five. We've accounted for eight until you came along and we reasoned there would be another seventeen, give or take."

"From what little I've seen, you must have quite the setup."

"We have around 30 cattle, over a dozen hogs, about the same in horses, a large flock of chickens, ducks and turkeys. We grew a large garden and canned. With the butcher-

ing we did, we have 3 freezers nearly full up of frozen meat and veggies. We wouldn't have any problem giving you a fair amount of meat if you could come up with a freezer."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, just like that."

"You took the large freezers from the store."

"Yes, but two smaller freezers would hold about as much as one large freezer."

"That's just it, we've been getting by on portable generators and it might be difficult to find another."

"We have a spare portable. Nancy used it to keep her freezer cold."

"Your wife?"

"No, Nancy the older woman who has the granddaughter, Jan. I know it's confusing, my first wife's name was Nancy. The attractive woman I first met is Molly Brown and she's my wife now and the mother of our new daughter. Andy is Molly's son from her first marriage to Andrew Brown. Nancy's last name is Wilson and her granddaughter's full name is Janice Birch. Do you mind if I ask what your situation is?"

"We eventually paired off. But only by mutual assent, I assure you. As it happens the women are all of child bearing age and are presently all expecting. Doing our part, you might say, of repopulating the world. And the good news is that since we're all immune, our children should have a better than even chance of being immune too. There were more survivors, but some of them didn't survive long."

"What happened?"

"They tried to take what wasn't being offered, if you get my meaning."

"Are you referring to the women?"

"Exactly so. Those of us with a more gentlemanly persuasion rectified that in short order. Dumped the bodies, they didn't deserve a decent burial. We found that by waiting, well, you get the idea."

"That's our story up to a point. It was Molly and/or Andy who took out the bad guys and then I came along. Our getting together was totally her decision."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 13

"Anyway you said there was a child."

"A boy, about 7."

"Andy is going on or is 11. We didn't celebrate a birthday, but he must be close to 11."

"My birthday is next week, dad."

"Really, what would you like for your birthday?"

"Anything I want?"

"If it's within reason."

"I'll take the M21. It's just a grown up version of my Mini-14 and packs one heck of a punch."

"I suppose you want a .45ACP, too."

"There's always Christmas."

"But your birthday is only 10 days before Christmas."

"Nine, but who's counting."

Had Molly not come early, she might have had two children with the same birthday, go figure. As far as I was concerned, if Andy could handle the bigger guns he might just as well have them now than wait until later when he would get them anyway. The rifle would run a fella around three grand plus the scope and it had the adjustable walnut stock. I'd have preferred he take the Super Match, but the only difference between the two was the stock. If he was using these, I'd better substitute the Winchester and Colt with .45 Colt. Indeed, he had grown like a weed over the past 10 months.

"Would you fellas like to get the things I offered and get back to town? I'm sure your womenfolk are worrying, not knowing how this all worked out."

"You said you have a spare generator?"

"I do and I can give you a couple of drums of gas if you need it. What did you use to stabilize the fuel in your truck?"

"Stabil, but it runs rough."

"I can fix you right up. You had the right idea, but the wrong product. Ever try PRI-G?"

"Heard about it, couldn't find any."

"I sort of cornered the market. I'll give you a gallon of it and some and PRI-D. Do you plan to stay in town?"

"We hadn't talked about it. It looks like you're about full up."

"We are but there are nearby farms. I feel much safer out in the country. This is only an acreage, but there other places that are real farms ranging from a quarter section up to a full section. Plenty of room to grow food for yourself and livestock. We don't grow live-stock feed so it might provide the basis for an economy, barter, trade, you know what I mean."

"None of us are farmers."

"Nancy spent most of her life on a farm and Molly is a farm girl too. As you can see, I have plenty of fuel."

"Truck stop?"

"Right, they had three trucks making deliveries. They pumped several thousand gallons a day, so there should still be several thousand, maybe hundred thousands of gallons and I have plenty of PRI products to restore it as we need it."

I gave them the things we discussed and they headed back to town. When I returned to the house, Nancy came out with a look on her face I couldn't interpret.

"Who were those guys?"

"Three of the other survivors from town. They followed my tire tracks. Look they brought a peace offering."

"Other?"

"Yes, they said there were three women and a 7-year-old boy. Plus, all of the women are expecting, they paired off."

"Do you think they're on the up and up?"

"At the moment, I have to say yes. I suppose time will tell, but they were open and didn't hold much back. They told me there were other survivors who didn't make it."

"They died?"

"More like they got themselves killed for trying to take liberties with the women."

"They say."

"Yes, but it is easy to verify. From something they said, I got the impression that they thought I had a harem out here."

"Explain."

"I mention that my wife was having a baby and they said, *You have a wife and three women?*"

"Sorry Jack, but you're not my type. I haven't seen anything from you that would suggest you have an eye on Jan and you do have a wife who just presented you with a lovely baby daughter. You two have really grown on each other. Did they say where they were staying?"

"In a Church, didn't say which one, but we know which pickup to look for. We should be able to find them the same way they found us. Would you like to make some excuse to meet the women?"

"Well... what do you have in mind?"

"Bake a batch of bread. Maybe make some cinnamon rolls. The boy would like that. It would give you a perfect excuse for a visit."

"Ok, but we'll leave Jan here and Andy to protect Molly and her. I'll bake the bread tomorrow and we'll take it to town as soon as it's out of the oven."

I thought you had to let bread cool before you took it somewhere. Nancy wrapped it in dish towels, put the whole shebang in a picnic basket and off we went. And yes, she took the Loaded with her. I gave Andy his Birthday and Christmas presents early, just in case. On the way to town I asked her about the bread and she said, you let it cool to cut it, not to move it.

Jonas had mentioned that they were living in a Church. He didn't say which one, but there were only about a dozen. I planned to check churches until I found the pickup because despite what I'd said, we couldn't follow their tracks – some of the streets lacked snow. The pickup was parked at the fourth Church I checked, Presbyterian, I think. We parked and entered the Church.

"Jonas, are you here?"

"I'm here, how did you find us?"

"There aren't that many Churches in town and this was the only one with your pickup parked outside. We brought a peace offering."

"We?"

"Nancy wanted to meet your wives."

"I didn't say we were married, I only said we were paired off."

"Whatever you call it, it amounts to the same thing. Nancy baked bread and some cinnamon rolls."

"All the women on the farm carry rifles?"

"Indeed, they do. As a matter of fact, Nancy picked out her rifle from my collection."

"Come on back to the kitchen, that's where we congregate, no pun intended."

"Let me make the introductions. Mary Alice is with me, Sue there is with Ralph and Anne is with Jake. Ladies, Nancy brought us some home baked bread."

That was all it took, Nancy and the ladies split off and the, as yet unnamed, boy joined them. Those cinnamon rolls were about the size of his head and looked like he was going to unroll it before he ate it.

"Did you get squared away with the freezers and get the genset to run?"

"Yeah. The PRI-G stuff got rid of the rough running in the pickup by the time we got back. We've talked some but haven't decided about moving out to a farm or three farms. You said one of the farms was large?"

"It's a full section, that's 640 acres or a square mile. There is the main house and a house for the foreman. I suppose you could take out a trailer if you all wanted to live on one farm and have separate homes. That might be a good choice, there's safety in numbers. Are you sure there aren't any other survivors in town?"

"Can't say. Haven't seen any. Don't mean nothing, I suppose. You didn't find us, not in 10 months of looking."

"Just thinking out loud here, but if you all relocated to the large farm, we might be able to find a large diesel generator and provide power. I have that wind turbine and solar panels and a generator, giving me triple redundancy. I got the solar and wind turbine down at the Capital and there was more stuff. Thing is, as I was leaving the store, someone shot at me. I got lucky and turned away from the shooter, but it's a consideration. I calculate there might be as many as 100 people down there."

"What about fuel?"

"We'll tow one or two of my trailers over to your farm. There's plenty of fuel at the truck stop like I told you. Plus there must be several truck stops around and most service stations sell diesel now."

"Where did you get your generator?"

"That rental place sold them, but I got the only large one they had in stock. You need something bigger than the one I got, about three times larger, maybe 100 kilowatts. Next time you come out, I show you our setup and how it works. We have more cattle and hogs than we need so we could give you a start on livestock and poultry. There are some rabbits I'd love to pawn off on someone."

"What's wrong with rabbit?"

"Would you rather eat rabbit or filet mignon?" (I like the line, and you might see it again)

"I see what you mean. Rabbit is a nice change, but not a steady diet."

"Anyone like duck? Man, we have just what you need."

"You said you have horses?"

"About a dozen. Give us a few seasons and we'll be able to supply you with almost as many. I haven't cleaned up the large farm. If you think you might want to go there, I ought to go over and clean up."

"You mean bury the bodies?"

"Yes. We can also get a new trailer from the sales lot if you want a single wide. I've never assembled a double wide."

"Hold on a minute, we haven't made any decisions and if we did decide to move out to that farm it probably wouldn't be until it warms up."

"I have a habit of getting the cart before the horse. I just wanted you to consider your options. You do have to plan ahead some if you're going to move there. You need power and have to clean out the grocery stores for food. Long term power probably means a trip to the Capital. It would affect us too because we'd have to start a bigger breeding program to supply the livestock."

"We'll come out next week and let you know. I know the ladies will want to fawn over that new daughter of yours. Would that be ok?"

"It should be perfect. We'll plan on you staying for dinner and put on a good feed. Turkey and ham ok?"

In The Aftertime – Chapter 14

The fellas and I visited about our jobs before the illness, our upbringing and our families. Nancy must have gotten talked out, she finally came with the picnic basket and ask if I were ready. I'll say, it was pitch dark outside and I was a little worried about Molly, Andy and Jan. But they had dog and Andy had his new guns so I doubted it would be too bad. I got on the CB on the way out of town and told Jan we were on the way and asked if everything were ok. Her only comment was that Molly had been worried about me.

Did you ever cause a woman to worry about you? If you do, you'll pay big time. It varies, but it always boils down to you were wrong for making her worry. It's also another of those Sgt. Schultz situations, there no way you can win. I was hoping Nancy might bail me out, we were late because she was gabbing with the women.

Of course just having a baby probably meant her hormones were running wild and there would be no way to predict how she might react. I braced myself to be prepared for anything from a tongue lashing to her throwing objects. I did get a little information I'd read on birthing.

As I told you before, I ought to go to Vegas since my luck was still running. When we got back, Nancy went in and talked to Molly and filled her in on the women in town and I suppose what gossip there was. I apologized for being late and was surprised, when Molly said, "No problem, Nancy explained." I stopped there, I didn't care what Nancy had explained as long as it had worked.

It being winter, we had to cave in and use the gas dryer for the clothes because hanging them on the line wasn't very practical and there wasn't room in the basement. I still had the propane delivery truck if the tanks ran low so I figured it didn't matter. Though those fabric softener sheets don't give your clothes the same fresh smell you get from line drying.

A week to the day, company showed up just after noon and we had a turkey thawed and a freshly cured ham to cook. Add to that corn on the cob, smashed potatoes, two kinds of gravy and you have the making of a fine meal and food to send home with your guests. Nancy had baked bread the day before and used some of the dough to make dinner rolls. Since Molly decided to nurse, I got to sleep in, most of the nights anyway. She assured me that once I got used to the baby crying, I'd sleep through the whole thing.

We decided on Mackenzie Susan Brown. I don't know where the Susan came from, either one of Molly's friends or relatives. She was my first and an absolute doll. While the ladies fawned over Mackenzie, the fellas and I got into our discussion about them moving to the farm. It was a conditional yes. The conditions included providing power, finding a third home, with some discussion on how much of the livestock they would need. Plus they wanted to know if I thought they might be able to get a large freezer in another town or the Capital. I offered to grade a spot for the trailer and suggested we brave a

trip down south to get the solar, wind and possibly a large generator. Our milk cow should provide enough milk for now until they could raise one of the heifers and get her bred for their own supply of milk. We'd keep five of the horses and they could have the rest provided the stallion provided stud service for our mares. We'd keep the geldings. Basically we agreed to a 60-40 split in their favor in exchange for them providing us feed. That included the chickens and turkeys and they got all of the ducks and rabbits.

"Hey you, you make good babies."

"She is cute isn't she? Are you disappointed we didn't have a boy?"

"Not, she can be daddy's little girl, just like you were."

"Not right away."

"I was talking about when she was out of diapers and a bit beyond the toddler stage."

"Andy likes Jan."

"In a sisterly sort of way?"

"It may go a bit beyond that."

"Do tell, he's only 11, or soon to be. I thought most boys didn't start to mature until age 13."

"As a rule they don't. However it doesn't happen overnight and I've noticed his voice changing. He's growing faster and that's another sign of puberty. One of these days, he'll be grown up and catch up to Jan. I'd prefer you not say anything, but keep your eyes open."

"I will. Considering the circumstances, they may be the only choice each other has for a normal life. Has there been any hanky panky so far?"

"Not that I know of. But he does seem to be more protective of Jan."

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I'd thought of it as being a boy protecting his older sister. But, since they weren't brother and sister, maybe I'd better reevaluate. Meanwhile, I had more important things to do, like clearing the space for the trailer and so forth. When I went down to the farm, I discovered a large generator, 100REOZJB, which he must have installed to run the whole farm. It was diesel with a 240v output of 400 amps and he had an above ground tank holding 2,500 gallons. It apparently had started and the low oil cutoff shut it down. I say that because there was still a lot of diesel, 2,000-gallons give or take. I figured about a gallon of PRI-D would restore it. The generator was low on oil and it looked dirty. I found

more oil and a box of filters in the machine shed. While I hadn't planned on doing this today, I decided to finish up what I started. When I was done, I tried to start the generator only to discover the battery was dead.

I got out my starter cables and gave the generator a jump. It groaned and moaned, but finally started. I let it idle for a while to put some charge on the battery. While it ran, I looked and found a good spot to set a trailer. I'd be back this afternoon and level the spot. If there was time, I might make a run to the Church and give them the good news about the generator. I checked the main house and the foreman's house. There wasn't anyone in either. Strange... maybe they bugged out. No, that wasn't right because their vehicles seemed to be here.

I went back outside and looked around some more. I found the new grave, big enough for two, maybe the farmer and his wife. There was no vehicle at the foreman's house, maybe he buried them and then bugged out. He didn't take much with him if he did, in searching the house I found food, the farmer's guns – a .30-06, 12-gauge and a .22 – and a large freezer full of spoiled food. You should have seen the canning jars, had we looked here first, we wouldn't have been looking in town and Nancy and Jan would still be there.

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"What did you find, Jack?"

"No bodies. They had a large 100REOZJB 400 amp generator that I got to run. It appears that foreman buried them and took off. About the only cleaning the house needs is emptying the spoiled food from the freezer. I thought I'd have a quick bite and drive the tractor over and level a spot for a trailer. If there's time, I thought about going to town and bringing Jonas up to date."

"If you go, Mackenzie and I might ride along. I'm to the stage where I'm getting cabin fever."

"So soon? Don't you have to rest up or something?"

"These days, the mother and baby leave the hospital the next day. Many times, she has no help and has to do it all herself. I'll be fine. We should stop by a store and pick up a few more baby things. I'd prefer cloth diapers if we can find them, we're about out of the disposable diapers."

"She sure is cute, isn't she?"

"Takes after her mother."

"Yes dear, I do believe she does. Give me two hours to get the spot graded and we'll go to town. If you make a list, I can help you shop."

Nancy had lunch ready and I ate, got my coat back on and got the tractor. It was too much trouble to remove the backhoe and replace it with the blade, so I decided to use the front end loader for the leveling. It would be more work and might not be as fancy, but who would know? When I got there, I checked the machine shed on a hunch and discovered that I hit my thumb with the hammer one more time. He had a large farm tractor and an old Ford with a 3-point hitch. It took about five minutes to mount his blade and I made short work of getting the spot leveled.

I believe I've already admitted to getting the cart before the horse at times. Maybe I should sit down and write a playbook, telling me the correct steps to take in any given situation. Anyway, I'd leave it to Jonas and his group to bury the dead livestock and would loan them the backhoe if they needed it. I was back home in less than 90 minutes and had spent more time on the road than actually working.

"You're back early."

"He had a tractor with a blade."

"Get cup of coffee or something Jack. We won't be ready for at least a half hour."

I got my cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

"You're lucky you know."

"In what regard, Nancy?"

"No post partum blues, a good milk supply and she's so in love with you."

"That's quite a jumble of things to string together. You threw me with the good milk supply."

"Mother's milk gives a baby a good start and passes important things the baby needs."

"We have cow's milk."

"It's not the same. Neither is goat's milk. Molly said she needed diapers and I suggested cloth diapers because they can be washed and reused. Plus, they're one size fits all."

"Were you satisfied that the ladies in town were all in the relationships voluntarily?"

"Seemed to be. I didn't hear any discord. It took a while for them to pair off, but I had impression that the women did the choosing instead of the other way around."

"They're all reasonably attractive, the fellas should be happy with the way it worked out."

"Beauty is only skin deep, Jack. You've probably heard that before, haven't you? Not to change the subject, but it seems like Andy is becoming attached to Jan."

"What does Jan think of that?"

"At the moment, I believe she thinks of him as a friend. Unless someone else comes along, I'd expect they'd pair off eventually."

"I have trouble getting that matter settled in my mind. He just turned 11 and isn't that far into puberty. She, on the other hand is maturing rapidly."

"She had a head start. The male of the species don't stop growing until about age 18. The female is ahead of the male, but he'll catch up. I think there is a fondness developing but given the age difference, it will just have to play out."

"We're ready. Jack, get the diaper bag, would you?"

"You're taking a rifle?"

"Don't leave home without it. Since you have all of those M1As, I was thinking about moving up to that Super Match, this HK93 isn't bad, but the cartridge leaves a lot to be desired. With a baby to protect, I want more stopping power. Jan expressed an interest in my HK."

I was fast running out of M1As. I had the M25, Andy the M21, Molly wanted the Super Match and Nancy had the Loaded. It wasn't a problem; we weren't short on 7.62x51mm ammo, not by a long shot. One type we had in abundance was the Lake City M118LR and there was ample surplus 168gr for the Standard and Loaded. Plus I still had the National Match model. A .308 rifle and a .45ACP gave a shooter all the stopping power he or she needed. Maybe Molly could give her Browning to Jan and take the other High Capacity .45.

"Stop here, Jack. Grab your Maglite; it will be dark in there. All I need is the diapers and an assortment of baby clothes."

"You got maternity wear and no baby clothes?"

"Yeah, well. If you lose the baby, you have all of those baby clothes around to remind you and that wouldn't be good. I had the disposable diapers and some of those universal boy/girl shirts. Now we can focus on girl's clothes. I wonder how small they make jeans."

"Probably not small enough. You can wait until she daddy's little girl for the jeans."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 15

I had a lot to learn, jeans came in sizes ranging from 6M and up. Molly said that was 6 months. Still, she concentrated more on girly things but did get 9 dozen cloth diapers and diaper pins. We finished up and on the way back to the pickup walked by a specialty store selling western clothing. At Molly's insistence we went in and picked up more jeans and cowboy hats. Good brand, I think, Resistol. I picked out a tan hat that said it was 100% Beaver, a Double Eagle. Must have been, based on the price tag. Molly got herself a felt hat and a straw hat, suggesting I pick out a straw hat. She said she'd bring Andy in to tryout the hats.

I think that woman is bound and determined to turn me into a cowboy. First there were the cowboy guns. That sort of made sense riding horses. I usually wore jeans but I'd never worn Wranglers before. The next thing you know, she'll want me to wear cowboy boots and there is nothing wrong with my Wal-Mart work boots.

What did I tell you? The specialty store also sold western boots and you guessed it, I ended up with a pair, but they were really tight. Molly said I had to break them in. I suppose I could, provided I don't end up crippled. She made it plain that we were coming back and bringing Andy and possibly Jan. With that out of the way, we headed to the Church.

"I have the spot leveled for a trailer. Turns out he had a large generator and with an oil change and a jump start, I got it to run. It's a big 'un, a Kohler 100REOZJB with a 4V11 alternator. He must have a welder somewhere. There weren't any bodies to clean up. I figure the foreman must have buried his employers and bugged out. You'll have to bury the dead livestock; I let you use my backhoe if you want."

"What about heat for the house?"

"I didn't check. Saw a propane tank out back, 550, I think. Don't have any idea what they used to heat. If they used coal, there's plenty of that at the power plant. If they used wood, you should be able to use coal. There's no timber on the farm that I know of. Plenty in the area, though, if there's a fireplace. You might want to consider finding that mobile home and moving it. We'll figure out how to wire and plumb it in. We'll just have to find the line for the septic tank and hook in to that. We can run a water line from the well house."

"What about backup power?"

"Let's get you settled before we risk a trip to the Capital. Have you given any thought to what food you might want to move?"

"We made a list and have been accumulating it. Are you planning on giving us a fuel trailer?"

"I thought I might give you two until you have the power situation resolved. My generator doesn't run that often, mostly to recharge the battery, in automatic cycling. Runs for 15 minutes once a week."

"Sounds like we need to get the trailer out there and set up. Phase two would be hauling the food and then we could move. We'll have to iron out some things, Jack. Their source of heat is important and it's still cold enough we'll have to have whatever we need to heat. As far as going to the Capital, we'll follow your lead. Might be better to do it sooner rather than later; once it heats up, there'll be crops to plant."

When the ladies were done ogling Kenzie, we headed back. We were no more out of the truck than Andy came out and said, "Neat, cowboy hats. Where's mine?"

"It's not that late Jack, do you feel up to taking Andy back to town to get hats and boots? I'll ask Jan if she wants to go."

"She might just as well, she can always get some jeans."

Andy got his Mini-14 and .45 pistol and climbed into the back. Jan presented herself shortly and I couldn't tell much from her expression, neutral might be the best description. Half an hour later, we were in the specialty store trying on clothes, boots and hats. Jan seemed to get into the mood and every time Andy found something he liked, she would look for something similar. Made me wonder...

Andy seemed have passed the stage where girls were an ough subject but wasn't quite to the leering stage. Conversely, Jan paid close attention to Andy despite the age difference. Jan was modest to the extreme, borrowing my MagLite to use a changing room as she tried on clothes. Andy simply turned around and changed clothes, sort of like out of sight, out of mind. After they had the hats, shirts and jeans, they went for the cowboy boots. Andy found a pair that fit, and then took identical boots in larger sizes. Jan also found a pair that fit, but only got the pair in the next larger size. She did take 2 pairs of each size. I found a second Beaver hat the same size as the first and grabbed it and another, identical, straw hat. I figured that they might wear out and more was better.

We got home just in time to wash up and sit down at the table. Kenzie was too little for a high chair and we didn't have one, another thing to add to my list. Better add a crib too. I'll take Molly with me and she can pick out what she wants. That should eliminate any disagreements. Just short of lunch time the following day, the three men pulled in.

"We have the trailer hauled and sitting there. Figured we ought to put in the water, sewer and electricity before we set it in place. We'll take you up on the backhoe; we plan to bury the lines."

"Did you find the septic tank?"

"We dowsed it. Dug down where the wires crossed and there it was. Have to dig three

trenches, one for sewer, a second for water and a third for electricity."

"Sounds like you have it well in hand."

"Learning to use that backhoe ought to be an experience. We'll figure it out ourselves. It's about time we got beyond living in that Church and stealing from grocery stores to survive."

Dowsing or divining is a much disabused art of locating water pipes, mineral deposits and so forth. I was, as a young man, a skeptic. Then one day my grandfather took two coat hangers and went out and walked a plot of land. "Dig here," he said. I was surprised to run into a water pipe about 6' deep. Don't know that I have the talent, but apparently someone in Jonas's group did.

About a week later they brought the tractor back and asked if I would haul a fuel trailer to the farm. I hooked onto a full trailer and pulled it to the farm. I parked it and they commenced to connecting pipes to the smaller diesel fuel tank. They restarted the generator and from what I could tell everything seemed ready to go.

"So, you're ready for phase two?"

"Actually, we hauled a pickup and trailer load every day when we came out to work on getting the trailer installed. The food is distributed among the homes and we used an empty bedroom in the trailer for a pantry."

"Then you're ready to move?"

"Yeah, I think we'll move out here tomorrow and then return to town until we have all the food we may need. It's about time to talk about the livestock."

"You'll get 60% of what we have, all the ducks and rabbits. We'll keep the five mares and the gelding and you can have the rest. We've got all the mares bred so we should double our herd in a few months. You can get milk from us for the time being. Are you ok on meat?"

"For the time being."

"You want to make the run down to the Capital next week?"

"Actually we rather not go at all. But you said that was the nearest source of solar and wind, so what choice do we have?"

"Not much. Make sure you're well armed. One thing we might consider is stopping at the central National Guard ammo distribution point at the military camp northwest of the Capital. You can never have too much ammo and they may have other things we can use."

"Like what?"

"Like something the military that has with multiple shots or uses really big bullets. Maybe those rockets I saw in a Dirty Harry movie."

"That was *The Enforcer* and those were what they call LAW rockets."

"You know them?"

"No, but I saw the movie too. They might have other things we can use. Machine guns, mines, hand grenades, smoke grenades, MREs, who knows?"

"If you get any of those things, make sure you get the instruction books."

"They're called Field Manuals, Jack. We'll get what we can find. Don't suppose you thought about getting a Hummer with a machine gun mount, did you?"

"Never crossed my mind. I figured we'd have to take three pickups and trailers."

"We could take two and get an open bed Hummer and a military trailer. That should do just as well and we'd burn up less fuel on the way down."

"Hummers run on diesel?"

"Hummers run on just about anything including jet fuel. In fact the Army's primary fuel is JP-8."

For someone who hadn't been in the military, Ralph seemed to be well informed. He told me it was a hobby and back when there was an internet, he'd downloaded many of the military field manuals. He said while he had very little (no) practical experience, he'd read those manuals from cover to cover more than once and most of the things we'd find at this level would be within his reading experience. He started to explain and I suggested that he wait until we had the actual object in hand and he could show me then.

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Over the next few days, they moved from town and we moved the livestock to their farm. Mary Alice, the woman paired with Jonas, said if we had extra milk, she could make cheese. Hey look, when they claim to be married, I'll call them husband and wife. But until then, they're paired, just like Jonas said. The dreaded day for our trip to the Capital loomed ever nearer.

There was no way to get ready for this adventure, but I took Molly's pickup and Jonas took theirs with Molly's trailer. I knew the way and the obstacles we faced, exactly where

we needed to go and pretty much what we needed to get. Basically it was the same stuff I got times three. That would give them a full-fledged wind farm with 3 towers and so forth. The barn faced the correct way to mount solar panels on it and between the main house and the barn I calculated they would have enough solar power.

All this assumes that someone hadn't beaten us to the stuff. There were, in my estimation, about 100 people in the Capital. For those of you wondering, a Capitol is a building and a Capital is a seat of government. I had to go back and correct my notes, wouldn't want those space aliens to think I was ignorant. We were in contact via CB radio, Jonas using the one with the cigarette lighter adapter and magnetic antenna mount. We didn't do a lot of 'good buddy stuff', this was serious business.

First stop was the National Guard Post Northwest of the Capital. We found a Hummer easy enough and eventually a trailer. Hummers have that high voltage system and it took some doing to get it started. We had to tow it, couldn't figure out any other way. Quite the task with an automatic transmission, I can tell you. This was supposed to be the ammo issue point and we looked until we found bunkers, broke the locks off and started taking notes. First we had to know what they had. Only then could we decide what to steal. Ma Deuce for sure, ring mount on the Hummer. Belted .50 caliber ammo, too.

"You might want to take some of that, Jack."

"I have plenty of .50 caliber ammo."

"Not like that, you don't. That's HEIAP, it's sort of a combo anti-personnel/anti-material round. Goes in and explodes, you know."

"How would I know that Ralph? I only just got the Barrett a few months back."

We ended up with some of those LAW rockets and Ralph demonstrated how to extend the two parts and how to fire them. He took some of those round grenades and showed us how to remove the safety clip and pull the pin. We only took what we thought we'd need in town and planned on stopping by on the way home. We could fill in any empty spots in our load with ammo and equipment. We used the cans of stabilized diesel we brought with us to fill up the Hummer and off we went.

They followed me right behind the Outback dealer's place of business and I slipped the lock like I had the first time. That was a good sign, told me that probably nobody broke in since my last trip. We spent 2-3 hours selecting and loading the equipment we wanted. That done, it was time to leave. I suggested that Jonas and Ralph take the Hummer and lead the way. I also told Ralph to man the gun, last time I pulled out, I'd been shot at. This time, however, we weren't.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 16

That would have been too easy. No, they waited until we were almost out of town before they let loose. And it wasn't someone anymore but several someone's. Ralph was fast on the trigger and he had that Ma Deuce going chugga-chugga-chugga. I couldn't drive and shoot and neither could Jake. We tucked in close and followed and somehow managed to not get our butts shot off or any windows shot out. Well, I couldn't shoot, but I could pull a pin and I pulled several pins, making a nuisance of myself. There just something about those defensive hand grenades, according to Ralph, that is really special. They not only go boom, but they throw shrapnel. I guess I thought that they still looked like pineapples.

"Jack, I think we should just go home."

"Negative Jonas, if nothing else, we need to replace the ammo Ralph shot up. We have a fair amount of room so let's take the time to grab all we can get. I'd prefer not coming down here again for any reason."

"Ralph agrees with you, I guess we'll stop and get the stuff you want."

Ralph must have been thinking about the matter since we left for the city. He wanted more belted .50 caliber, another Ma Deuce – so each farm would have one he said – the bigger AT4 rockets, and all the 5.56 and 7.62 ammo we could fit in, especially the M118LR. I thought the smaller LAW rocket was kinda cute and definitely easier to use and I filled most of my corners with the rockets and both sizes of ammo. I wouldn't run out of 9mm or .45ACP anytime soon and the Army didn't have .45 Colt.

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"How did it go?"

"The same as before only there were more of them. Didn't get any windows shot out. Picked up some hand grenades, rockets and a few cases of ammo. The other three are going to be busy for a while installing solar panels, batteries and 3 wind turbines. With luck, they won't have to run that big generator very often. Do we have any cold beer?"

"Just the old stuff they gave you as a peace offering. It's in the fridge, want one?"

"Yes, please. No more trips to the Capital for me. Oh, we have to find a place to mount a .50 caliber machine gun."

"Big boy toy?"

"Blame it on Ralph. He said each farm should have one."

"What do you prefer?"

"Those handy little rockets like in the Dirty Harry movie."

"Did you get some?"

"Yeah, I pulled them out of their cases so I could fit more into the pickup. We need to find someplace safe to store them. I didn't get the chance to use one, but I did throw a few of those grenades. Got more of those too. Tossed them loose into a box. Have to put them up with the rockets. Probably have to teach everyone how to use the machinegun including me. Ralph has a flair for these things. Never was in the military, but said it was his hobby. Knew how to use the Ma Deuce and should be able to teach us."

"Your really think we'll have to use it? Not that I mind, but out here in the country, who would find us?"

"Jonas, Ralph and Jake found us."

"You left tracks."

"When do you think we might... you know?"

"About 3 weeks. Have to let everything get back to normal and well, you know."

"Actually no I don't."

"Come see me when the box of napkins is gone and we'll talk about it."

"Oh, I see."

"I don't think you do. Normally, it takes 6-8 weeks for everything to get back in place and the bleeding to stop. However, since I'm nursing Kenzie, it goes faster. I think it would be fair to say about six weeks from birth until we resume our late night romps."

"You get prettier every day."

"That won't get you there any sooner."

"No, I mean it. You glow, or is that something all new mothers do?"

"To some extent, I guess. So are you done saving the world? Can we count on some degree of normalcy?"

"You mean shut up and dig the spuds, huh?"

"I just want things to be some semblance of what they were before the illness. A semi-normal life. Time to live out our years and raise our children. No more adventures with

me wondering if you're coming home on two feet or in a box."

"Believe you me, it will never be what it was before the illness. Things are different now, Molly. At least I don't have to worry about you because you can take care of yourself. I'm not going looking for trouble, but with my luck, trouble with probably end up finding me."

"Am I trouble?"

"No and neither is Andy. He's quite the young man for an 11-year-old. The only thing that concerns me is this thing between him and Jan."

"What thing?" she played dumb.

"It's gone from essentially drop dead to brother-sister to a certain fondness. Oh, you weren't at the store when they picked out jeans, hats, shirts and boots. She was typically modest, but everything Andy chose she chose or as close as she could get."

"Did you talk to Nancy about this?"

"I had a general discussion with Nancy about Andy and Jan but not about this specifically. She said something to the effect that Andy was getting attached to Jan."

"Let's not make a mountain out of a mole hill. There is three years difference and at the moment that is a big thing. What's the age of consent in this state?"

"I don't know and where did that come from?"

"You read all that stuff in the papers about romances between teachers and their students."

"And for a long time it was male teachers and female students. When the shoe was on the other foot, things got very different. There was that Mary Kay Letourneau case. I heard that it has been argued that the effects of pupil-teacher sexual harassment vary depending on the gender of the student and the harasser. In some states in the US, sexual relations between a woman and an underage male did not even constitute statutory rape until the 1970s. Many assert that most boys would be happy to have a teacher show sexual interest in them."

"But, it's my little boy."

"He won't stay little forever."

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I just had to change the subject. Getting Molly all worked up over something over which

she had little control wouldn't serve any purpose. Besides, between Jan and Andy, I perceived it to be mutual to a degree. She had changed a lot more than he had, he didn't have any problem with her from the outset, at least not once he was past the ugly stage. And, whether he realized it or not, he had seen her body mature, filling out as it were. She had to switch from boys jeans to girls jeans as her hips widened. All subtle changes he may or may not have noticed.

Every day after I finished the chores and had breakfast, I drove over to Jonas's place to help them with the solar and wind turbines. We excavated 3 holes and went to town to get 1½ loads of concrete to fill the tower bases. After, we began to assemble the towers and turbines. I returned in the early evening and milked the cow, put down feed and did any other chores. Andy was a bit shy on being big enough to muck the stalls, a real shame, that was. Another year I figured and I'd have more outside help.

Jan gathered the eggs and Andy fed the chickens and turkeys. Thank God the ducks were gone. If anyone wanted duck or rabbits, I was fairly sure the other farm could spare some. In keeping with our breeding program every farm animal that could be bred had been. The time seemed to fly while I was helping the fellas and one night, Molly announced that she was going to get a shower. When she came down in her robe, I took the hint and got my own shower and robe.

Jonas called with a million questions about planting crops. Nancy volunteered to go over and cover what they would need to know. She started them out with spreading the manure, and then plowing it under and disking the field. They initially were going to divide 40 acres between corn, wheat and alfalfa. She suggested 20 acres of each and a fourth 20 acre plot for soybeans. It was possible that she even got them started with plow and later the disk. She also suggested I plant 10 acres of wheat.

I didn't have a plow and had to wait for Jonas to finish up. That gave me time to till our garden spot. I took the tiller over to their farm so they could prepare their seed beds. Our living rooms looked like a nursery until we started setting out the plants. We agreed to share our extra produce with them in exchange for them providing livestock feed.

My wife Nancy and I had 8 pails of wheat with a storage life of about forever. Until we could grow wheat to replace what we were using up, Molly and I agreed to share it with the Jonas clan. We'd also have to share the spare Country Living Mill so they could grind their own flour.

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The day came that was our first anniversary. That's paper and I had no idea what to get her. Any candy still in town had to be old and stale. Molly had everything she needed, she saw to that. After much thought, I decided to give her the Super Match she had asked for but hadn't needed up until now. That allowed her to give her HK93 to Jan.

"It's about time."

"I'm glad I didn't give it to you earlier, I was having a devil of a time finding something to give you for our first anniversary. I hope you never have to use it beyond the range."

"So, you give me a rifle? No candy? No paper? How does this rifle compare to the one you gave Andy?"

"Same exact rifle with a different stock. His has the adjustable and this one doesn't. Both the M21 and M25 are sniper rifles. This rifle is every bit as good, but has a more conventional stock."

"I didn't get you a present."

"You're present enough for me."

"I'll make it up to you. Later."

I had a pretty good idea what she had in mind and dropped it, until later. Molly was just now regaining her figure, but since she was still nursing, she was still top heavy. Andy took Jan to the range to try out her new rifle and to practice with his. They also took the pistols and I presumed they'd be gone a while. Those two are getting as thick as thieves. Jan was totally out of that shell I noticed when I found Nancy and her.

This year, I got to plant most of the garden, under Molly and Nancy's direction of course. Lacking any knowledge about how to plant wheat, I sowed it. It was an antique from a previous time, broadcast sowing had long ago been replaced by drilling. I used what I could find and then shared it with Jonas so they could broadcast wheat, oats and alfalfa. Once the crops were in the ground, I was reduced to weeding with Jan and Andy's help.

Nancy was busy re-washing the canning jars, getting ready for the upcoming canning season and Molly concentrated on Kenzie and house work. One house with two women meant there wasn't that much for them to do. They kept it spic and span and it meant less work for them in the long run. By the way, I really enjoyed my anniversary present. Woo-hoo!

One day, working in the garden, I paused to wonder, "Is this all there is to life from now on?" Unless some of the other survivors found us, I reasoned that it probably was. That thought led to me wondering if we should be out trying to locate more survivors. We had proof positive that there were some in the Capital, although they weren't exactly pleasant. With two other farms in the immediate vicinity, we could transplant more survivors and possibly improve our situation... or not.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 17

At one of our occasional Sunday get-togethers, I posed the question, "Should we go look for more survivors?"

There were 9 adults and 9 different opinions. The ladies, who all had new babies, were not receptive to the idea. Ralph, no doubt thinking of the amount of firepower we had, was less reticent. Jake and Jonas didn't really have much to say. Nancy said something about opening a can of worms and I got defensive, stating that it was only a thought. I went on saying that we had the two other farms and if we could find some good people to populate them, we might be better off.

That started an open discussion of the pros and cons and the risks involved. While it might be better to have people on the other two farms or even several of the farms in the area, there was the question of who would constitute good people. My response was that we had to look no further than ourselves as models of who might constitute good people. I wasn't explaining it well, or something. What I had in mind was hard working, self actuating, moral people who lived by a reasonable set of principles.

I wasn't suggesting that they had to be perfect; perhaps the others thought that's what I meant. If we could find some farmers who might be willing to relocate it could greatly improve our situation, us not really being farmers. Jonas asked why a farmer would want to relocate from where he already was. Surely, he would have little to gain, already having land and farm equipment. My response was the not unexpected, "there's safety in numbers."

"There is that, Jack. Have you considered that these people you are talking about would have the same reservations we had about contacting you? We waited until nearly the last moment and then were terrified at the prospect, what with us assuming you had a harem and what not."

"Consider the other choice, Jonas. We stay here and farm and wait for someone to show up. As you said, that farmer probably won't be looking. The people who will be looking are those too lazy to provide for themselves and would prefer to steal, rather than grow, food."

"We have that welder, I should be able to fashion another machinegun mount for the back of a pickup," Ralph added.

"Ralph, say you are the farmer and in pulls a Hummer with machinegun mounted and a pickup. What would you think? I believe that you would presume that they are up to no good and behave accordingly."

"I suppose if we went, we could take an unadorned pickup and have the Hummer follow."

"Which then puts the passengers of the pickup at risk," Jonas continued.

"It was just a thought fellas, nothing we have to resolve today. Soon, we won't be able to go because we'll be harvesting crops, canning, getting ready to butcher and what not."

"I can agree with that Jack, it's more of a winter thing. Like looking for the steam and smoke from home heating. I'd be willing to reopen the matter at a later date."

"I move we table it for now."

"Agreed."

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And, over the course of the summer, we had a lot of work to do. Harvesting the garden, butchering chickens and turkeys, birthing new livestock, reaping the wheat and other crops, canning, making trades, the list seemed endless. It was cold earlier this year so we butchered before Thanksgiving. No climate change or anything, just the normal weather fluctuations.

We did a joint Thanksgiving and not only filled our bellies but gave thanks for all that nature, and our hard work, had provided this year. We were making a list of things we wanted but didn't have, for example an oats roller to make oatmeal. American oatmeal is rolled oats and Scottish oatmeal is ground oats. Learned that at the library. They had a whole collection of books on primitive skills.

We left the discussion tabled and went back to town throughout the winter, until we'd checked every house in town. Our supply of canning jars and lids grew, as did our arsenal. We ended up with more large canners, too. We salvaged anything we could use and the only thing we failed to find was more survivors. I had been sure we would find more survivors, that figure I used of 25 was an average. We had accounted for a total of 19 including those men that Jonas et al. had eliminated.

Christmas came and went and Andy was 12 and Molly was pregnant. We added to our LTS supplies, usually just a little at a time, but occasionally to a large extent. There were a few preppers or survivalists in town who had vast stores set aside for an incident just like this one. In order to use the supplies, one had to first survive. We found more than one prepper who had everything his family needed, except immunity. We still had no idea what the disease had been and continued to refer to it as the illness.

"Two in diapers?"

"We'll just have to get more diapers. Kenzie is well on the way to being potty trained, we might or might not have two in diapers."

"I'll get all I can find when we go into town tomorrow."

"I want to go too. Kenzie is a growing girl and I need to lay in several larger sizes and those jeans for Daddy's little girl."

"We've searched the whole town and haven't found any other survivors so you probably won't need weapons."

"Sez you. Never leave home without it, remember? If you have it, you may not need it but if you don't... you know."

"I do. And, I recognize that some of those folks from the Capital could show up at any time. Based on what we've seen so far, I think it likely that some of the survivors didn't survive long. Still, there could easily be way over a thousand in this state alone."

"Has the discussion concerning bringing in more people been permanently tabled?"

"So it would seem, Molly. I'll not go against the majority of the group and at the moment, the majority seems in favor of not announcing our presence or risking seeking out other people."

"That's ok with me, I have a husband to love, two children with a third on the way and we're doing fine by ourselves."

These days, I wore cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, western cut shirts from the specialty store and as often as not rode a horse over to Jonas's place and often wore the Colt and carried the Winchester. I had learned to roll with the punches of life in general. I tried to anticipate and avoid arguments. And, this year, I had a real present for Molly for our second anniversary. It was cotton, too. It was a red dress in just her size and I got the idea from a song I'd once heard.

*I've never seen you looking so lovely as you did tonight
I've never seen you shine so bright
I've never seen so many men ask you if you wanted to dance
They're looking for a little romance
Given half a chance
And I've never seen that dress you're wearing
Or that highlights in your hair
That catch your eyes
I have been blind*

CHORUS:

*The lady in red is dancing with me
Cheek to cheek
There's nobody here
It's just you and me*

*It's where I wanna be
But I hardly know this beauty by my side
I'll never forget the way you look tonight*

*I've never seen you looking so gorgeous as you did tonight
I've never seen you shine so bright you were amazing
I've never seen so many people want to be there by your side
And when you turned to me and smiled it took my breath away
And I have never had such a feeling such a feeling
Of complete and utter love, as I do tonight*

CHORUS:

*I never will forget the way you look tonight
The lady in red
My lady in red
I love you...*

Lady in Red - Chris DeBurgh

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The song referred to his wife. Giving Molly a red dress would be perfect, even if we didn't have any place to go to where she could show it off, other than to Jonas's farm. If anything, after she gave birth to Kenzie, her figure had improved. When she stopped nursing, she didn't lose all of the fullness upstairs, but she slimmed down to right where she was before she got pregnant. I wouldn't have minded if she lost all of the fullness, she was just right, either way.

You may ask yourself how I knew the lyrics. I played the song over and over, copying the words until I had a complete song, that's how. The record had been my mother's and left behind when she took off. It's one of the few things that I have that was hers.

Around the time of our anniversary, I started to get that urge to go look for more people. It was that, *Is this all there is to life* question that kept popping up. There was nothing wrong with the life we had, don't get me wrong, but I've always been naturally curious. Sort of like not ever passing a tree without looking to see what's on the other side. I dug around and found a state road map. I told Molly, I couldn't stand it anymore, I have to check out some of the nearby towns.

"If you go, I'm going with you."

"I wouldn't think of it, you're expecting."

"I'm not that far along and let's face it, who would you rather have covering your back?"

"You have me there. I still don't like it, though."

"If you go, I go. You are going to have to make a choice, Jack. Andy can stay here and keep an eye on things. We'll try one town, large enough to have a grocery store, and go from there. You have to show me how to use those rockets and grenades."

"Ok, but my heart won't be in it."

"We'll want to go fairly soon. It's still cold enough out for you to look for smoke."

I was caught between a rock and a hard spot. Had I been totally logical about this, I would have just stayed home, but it wasn't in my nature. The next town down the road had a population of about 7,000 and two grocery stores. That would indicate that about 7 people survived and there should be ample LTS food supplies. We stopped by Jonas's place on our way.

"Molly and I are going out on an adventure. I've got ants in my pants and she insists on coming to cover my back."

"Where are you going?"

"Just the next town over to the west."

"Do you think that wise?"

"Look, Jonas, the population was only around 7,000 before and should only be around 7 now. They had two grocery stores and we can always use more LTS foods."

"I'm going with you," Ralph said. "You two neophytes might just get your behinds shot off."

"I've instructed Molly in use of the grenades and the LAW."

"Good, then I won't have to. Give me 5 minutes to get my stuff and we'll be off."

It was only 20 miles, it's not like we couldn't have driven there anytime. We hadn't, but we were now. I was generally familiar with the town and Ralph informed that he'd once lived there. Had I known that Ralph would go, I could have left Molly at home. It wasn't to be and when we got there, Ralph directed me to the larger of the two grocery stores.

It didn't take long to determine that almost nothing had been removed from the store. Everything that qualified as a LTS supply was there. Ralph suggested we go check out the other store because that would give us a clue whether anyone in the town had survived. It was only a mile away and when we walked in it was immediately apparent that someone had survived. Things like macaroni and cheese, shelf stable, easily prepared food, had all but been cleaned out.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 18

"I'd say that there is a survivor and the survivor is a kid," Molly suggested.

"Why?"

"Because an adult would have taken more than just shelf stable, easily prepared food. An adult would have gone to both stores instead of just this one. I'd say probably a pre-teen, maybe more than one. He or she was probably just cleaning out one store at a time and probably doesn't know how to cook too many things. My money would be on a boy. Many pre-teen girls know a little about cooking."

"I'd assume that he would be living on this side of town. Still that means something on the order of 1,500 houses to search to find him."

"Or," Ralph said, "We could just sit and wait until he shows up for more food."

"Why don't you do that Ralph? Molly and I will go back to the first store and load the pickup and trailer."

"Might work, he may not have seen how many of us there are. Or, he could be just across the street with a weapon pointed at us."

"Molly and I have body armor. I think it best that we go and you stay."

"Body armor? Well, in that case..."

"I thought so."

The body armor was the only reason I gave in. Or, did you forget about our trip to the police station and the fact that Nancy and I had Point Blank SWAT armor with the plates? We headed back to the first store, I found an empty pallet and a pallet jack and we started loading, beans, rice, coffee and so forth. The trailer would hold about eight pallet loads and the pickup about four. It took some time to get it all loaded and we'd have to make a second trip to finish up. The store had a recent delivery and there were many pallets of food sitting in the aisles. Make that three trips for this store and two for the other store. We returned to the second store and Ralph was outside all but sitting on a kid. A boy just a little younger than Andy.

"Who do we have here?"

"He either can't talk or refuses to talk. I haven't been able to get a thing out of him."

"Let me try," Molly said. "Hi, my name is Molly and I have a boy named Andy who is just about your age. Can you tell me your name?"

"Steve."

"Steve or Stephen?"

"Stephen but everyone called me Steve."

"How old are you Steve?"

"Eleven."

"Are you the only person in town?"

"There are lots of others, but they're all dead."

"And it's just been you since the illness?"

"My mom survived. So did some other people. About 5 all total. Two left and this guy stayed. He tried to make my mom do something bad and I got my .22 and shot him right in the head."

"What about your mom?"

"She died too, he hurt her something awful."

"Steve, we're from the next town over. We live on a farm and have plenty of food, horses to ride and someone your age to play with."

"I don't know."

It was my turn. "Steve, we're cleaning out the grocery stores. After, we'll clean out any sporting goods stores and probably clothing stores."

"Are you a real cowboy?"

"Oh, my clothes? No not really, although we do have cattle on our farm and I ride a horse from time to time. Our son Andy has a grown up rifle and pistol and if you came, we'd dress you up like a cowboy and eventually you'd have you own rifles and handguns."

"Really? A six shooter?"

"Eventually, if you want."

It's not like years ago when every kid dreams of growing up to be a cowboy. However, I think that every boy dreams of having a six shooter or maybe a Winchester. But, what do I know? I guess it worked, Steve said he needed to get some clothes before he

moved and knew just where to get what he wanted. It was another western specialty shop. He got the whole nine yards, jeans, boots, hats, fancy belt and shirts. He went to an adjacent store and picked out underwear and socks plus a new, warm coat. We headed back to Jonas's place and shared our bounty with them. They were glad to have something besides Yuban to drink. I told Jonas that it would take anywhere from 3 to 5 trips to clean out the food and another trip or two to clean out any sporting goods. He offered to drive their truck and Ralph said he could drive Molly's pickup and trailer. Jonas had been to U Haul and had a 6x12 open bed trailer. Perhaps we could do it in only two trips using 3 pickups and trailers. Steve went home with us.

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"Everyone, this is Steve. He will be living with us from now on."

Nancy and Jan were quick to say hi, Andy less so. His eyes kept darting between Steve and Jan. I could only image what he was thinking, *competition*. But he was head and shoulders above Steve and eventually Steve and he were off, exploring. Mind you, Andy was wearing his Colt .45, as was usual, and I could just image him saying, *Fill your hands, you SOB.*"

For her part, Jan tended to treat Steve more like she treated Andy in the beginning. Definitely not the kind of fond relationship like she had with Andy. Molly and I agreed that Andy didn't have anything to worry about, but you try telling that to a 12-year-old boy who just might be starting to become seriously attached to a female. I held off for a while giving Steve the six shooter or any other firearms.

I think that the thing that finally gave Andy his confidence back was when Jan slid her arm behind his in the usual embrace that tells the world that he is her man. Well, not a man yet, by any stretch, but you get the idea. I don't even know if that's what she meant to do, but the effect was immediate on both Andy and Steve.

"I think our little boy is growing up."

"I don't know if I like that or not Jack."

"He didn't do anything. That was Jan's doing but I'm not totally sure she was staking a claim."

"Did you see the expression on Steve's face? Almost like someone hit him between the eyes with a baseball bat. It doesn't necessarily mean she's staking a claim, in normal times, but these aren't normal times."

"All the more reason to check out other towns. We have to find a girl to pair Steve up with."

"You say that like she would be just so much meat on a plate."

"I didn't mean it that way."

Molly didn't agree and I had stepped in it big time. Of course, it could have been a combination of events, Jan and Andy apparently pairing and my talking about finding a girl for Steve to have as a friend. That aside, it took two more days to clean out what we wanted from the next town over. Now mind you, this was far different than some of those patriot fiction stories where the survivors of WW III salvage. WW III would have been nothing in comparison to what we faced. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the world's population had died. The population of the world hadn't been this small since around ~7,000BC.

"Do you want to continue west or go east this time?"

"I don't really care. It should be a community with one or more grocery stores."

"I thought your primary criterion was the town having a female of the right age for Steve."

"For crying out loud, Molly, you took that the wrong way. I had in mind a companion more his own age and yes, of the female persuasion."

"I suppose that makes sense in a distant sort of way."

"As small as our community is, I believe it would be better if the pairing were roughly even. One of the purposes of our existence is to procreate. I've always been very uncomfortable with the boy-boy and girl-girl pairings, it isn't natural."

"Yeah, huh? Ok, let's go east."

"Let's wait until next week. We don't want to be gone too much; you never know when the MZBs are going to show up."

And Molly was stunning in her red dress. I gave it to her and she slipped into it and had to go show the girls how thoughtful I had been. Interestingly, the women at the other farm were a bit younger than the men. Not a lot, but younger. I didn't make anything out of that, luck of the draw, perhaps.

The following week we headed east. It was further, about 30 miles to a town with a grocery store. Only one store this time and again, it seemed apparent that a child had been taking food. All the cereal and snacks food we gone. Some cans had been opened and the contents eaten on the spot. The child couldn't have been much younger than Steve or he or she might not have survived. We didn't even have to use a ruse. In she walked, bold as brass and said we should leave her food alone and get our own.

"What's your name honey?"

"It's not honey. It's Michelle."

"Ok Michelle, my name is Molly. How old are you?"

"Ten."

"Is there anyone else in town?"

"Dead people. They're everywhere. My daddy got sick. My mommy ran away a long time ago."

Michelle wasn't too much on bathing, apparently. Her clothing was filthy, she was filthy, her hair a rat's nest. She said her last name was Jones. That's a fairly common name, I think. We could take all that was worth taking in the three pickups and three trailers, including any sporting goods we might find. Sporting goods is a euphuism for firearms and ammo, if you haven't figured that out by now. It could include things like Coleman fuel, and canned kerosene.

By now it was apparent that we didn't need to do much more salvage work for the immediate future and we did, in fact, find a paring for Steve Smith. Besides it was getting on to planting season and we had to make decisions. It was what to plant and where to plant it, among other things.

For the time being, I left Michelle totally in Molly, Nancy and Jan's care. We had been adding children but no adults, so far. I couldn't fathom that; one would have thought that adults stood a better chance of making it than children. However, the facts spoke for themselves and so far, the children proved to be more flexible. Those adults that had survived had either taken off or been killed. Was that a comment on our society? I won't wax and wane philosophic, but it was something else to consider.

Most societies die out. Consider the Aztec, Maya and Inca. All victims of the Spanish. Consider the native Americans, victims of everyone from Hawkeye to the Texas Rangers to George Armstrong Custer. At least they had a chance to fight back because they could see their enemy. Our enemy had been microscopic or perhaps even smaller. That didn't make it any less deadly, in fact it may have made it more deadly. And there I go, off on a tangent.

I think the first thing that they did to or for Michelle involved a scrub brush, peeling off layers of dirt. After, I heard screams for quite some time while they got rid of the rat's nest. She cleaned up good, there was a shining face under all of that dirt. Some of it would have to wear off, like her elbows. They had to dress her in jeans until they could get to town and salvage clothes her size. They did that the next day and got girls clothes for dress plus jeans and cowgirl clothes for everyday.

It wasn't so much that we were stuck on cowboy/girl clothes as it was their practicality.

Jeans wear well, lasting a long time. Boots wore out or the heels ran down but we could fix that at the cobbler's shop, he had all of the tools and supplies. As I no doubt mentioned, I wore jeans most of the time. The only thing that changed was my footwear and a western hat replaced the baseball cap. That probably explains why my hair is thinning.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 19

During the first part of May, I was working in the garden when Andy came running.

"Mom wants you. Right now, dad."

I ditched the hoe and headed to the house on a dead run, a hundred different thoughts racing through my mind.

"What's up?"

"Jonas called. They have strangers over there. He suggested you get the big gun and head that way. I'm going to take the M25 and go with you."

"No way."

"Way and Andy is coming too with his M21."

"Don't count me out," Jan said hefting the HK93.

"Nancy will you... "

"I'll watch them, someone has to stay. Y'all be careful, hear."

I hadn't detected a southern accent earlier, what else didn't I know? Didn't have time to stand around visit about it, I grabbed one box of LAWs and Molly grabbed the box of grenades. The Barrett's magazines had long since been filled with that super duper ammo I got from the National Guard. We piled in the pickup and headed toward Jonas's place. I turned in a driveway to one of the fields, allowing us to approach from the rear. When I got to the out buildings, I parked and we spread out. Normally, I wouldn't use a scope to check out a situation, preferring binoculars. I forgot them and it was a 14 power scope at the highest setting.

I saw six men, a pickup load, all armed, arguing with Jonas, Ralph and Jake. The head dude was poking his finger in Jonas's face trying to make a point. Molly whispered on her FRS radio, "What do you think? It doesn't look good."

"Wait one, Molly. Let them make the first move. I'll take the head guy and you get number two. Andy, you take number three and Jan, get the number four man in your sights. I'll either tell you to shoot or you'll hear my gunshot. Either way, take them down."

"K"

It wasn't but a minute before the head guy went for his handgun. He didn't make it and the next three went down in the same instant. I shifted my aim for number five but he was already down. I switched to number six and he was down too. Walking up to Jonas,

Ralph and Jake I was sure hoping I did the right thing and hadn't misconstrued something.

"Dang, I thought you were never going to shoot. Did you see how he was in my face?"

"I saw him going for his handgun and that's when I shot. I don't know who got number's 5 and 6, they were down by the time I got to them. Who were they?"

"Didn't say. Kept insisting we had to share what we have. I was trying to explain that we'd help them but we weren't about to just hand over all we had."

"I have his wallet," Ralph said. "The address is the Capital. Wee, does he have a bundle of cash."

"Ain't worth nothing, Ralph. If it was, he could have bought his way out of trouble. Nice guns though. No doubt stolen from a gun dealer in the Capital. I've got dibs on this one, it's a Kimber."

"So is his rifle. It's model 8400 Tactical."

"You can take it; I don't want a bolt action."

"You can divide the spoils after we leave, fellas. Got yourselves another pickup too."

"When I sent the radio message I don't know what to expect. I glad you showed up when you did, I doubt I could have held them off much longer."

"We came as fast as we could, Jonas. I wonder if they told any of the others down in the Capital where they were going?"

"Sure nothing more than the name of the town."

"Let assume that for now, how did they find your farm? You aren't making smoke and the generator isn't running."

"Maybe they got a license plate and traced it back to us."

"The only problem with that is we don't have any license plates."

"Oh, right. I guess I have no idea how they found us. Was it dumb luck or did we do something to give ourselves away?"

"Were you using the large tractor?"

"We were but would the sound carry the four miles to town?"

"All of the normal background noise that we were accustomed to doesn't exist anymore and if the wind were in the right direction, I suppose it could have. As much as I hate to suggest it, we need to go back to carrying both rifles and handguns."

"The ladies won't like that."

"I don't like it either Jonas. Until we can sort this out, I think we're going to have to bite the bullet and do it whether we want to or not."

"I've got a better idea," Ralph spoke up.

"Oh?"

"Yeah why don't we take our heavy arms and drive down to the Capital. We should have them way out gunned and maybe we can eliminate the problem once and for all."

"Molly is expecting; I can't let her go. I suppose we could take Andy and Jan."

"Nancy seemed comfortable with a firearm."

"If we took her, it would leave Molly with two kids who haven't been trained on using guns. I'm not sure I like that."

"For crying out loud Jack, we can get more supplies from the National Guard and blow them up if nothing else. There was no shortage of those M-4 rifles with the grenade launchers. We can take that Hummer back and locate another with a ring mount. There would be seven of us armed to the teeth. It's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog."

"When?"

"The sooner the better, before they realize that their people aren't coming back."

"Jack, do you have to do this?"

"I think maybe we do, Molly. We'll distribute the extra body armor for insurance. It might not stop all rounds but we'll have a real advantage."

"What's the rating level on the body armor?"

"Level IIA, and we don't have the ceramic inserts."

"Do you have enough we can wear two layers?"

"Maybe, I'll have to check."

We didn't but another trip to town yielded 3 pairs of ESAPI plates and enough vests for the others to double up. Other than give the extra vests to the other group, I didn't mention ESAPI plates. Andy, Jan and I each had the plates and when the day came, we headed out with the Hummer in the lead. Our first stop was at the National Guard post where we picked up a few extra things. I left my pickup sit, replacing it with an up armored Hummer and Ralph mounted an Mk 19 40mm machinegun.

We drove on to the Capital, hoping against hope that we could reason with these people. We must have startled the person they had keeping lookout, BAMM and a spider webbed crack appeared on the passenger side of our vehicle's front window. I told Jan to drive and I'd crew the grenade launcher. I didn't have a clear target and waited until I did. Ralph was also biding his time.

We moved a little further and they opened up. I was guessing that when the first shot rang out, they hastily assembled their force. Now, we had real targets and after a pair of poorly placed shots, I got the hang of the grenade launcher. We had them out gunned, and in my humble opinion, out classed. This wasn't a quick battle, it lasted long enough for me to get into my fourth can of grenades. Ralph was using carefully placed and timed fire with his chugga-chugga-chugga, short, well placed bursts.

Those dirty cowards didn't fight to the last man, either. As we began to reduce their numbers, some seemed to bail out on the others, heading for cooler climes. Eventually, the fire from their side fell and then stopped. Our Hummers had taken many hits, but that up armor stuff is good, we hadn't experienced a single casualty, so far. Now came the hard part, checking the casualties on the other side, all the while keeping a look out for those that had run off.

"No prisoners!" Ralph yelled.

I didn't know as I could shoot a wounded person lying on the ground. Moreover, I wanted a prisoner to pump for information. Fortunately, it wasn't a decision I had to make immediately. Ralph, Andy and Jan didn't seem to have any trouble dispatching any survivors; Jake and Jonas seemed to pause before they shot. After finding several bodies, I found a slightly wounded woman. I decided to let her live for now and pump her for that information.

"How many of you were there?"

"Go to hell."

I obviously wasn't going to get anywhere this way. I grabbed her wounded arm and gave it a twist. Her scream got everyone's immediate attention. Small woman, loud voice.

"How many of you were there?"

"About 50, give or take."

"Are there any others?"

She clammed up again and I gave the arm another twist, reminding her I was the healthy guy with the gun.

"A dozen. There are about a dozen who take care of our needs."

"Any others?"

"Not anymore."

"Where are they?"

"We locked them up in the jail at the Sheriff's station. Don't hurt me, I'm cooperating."

"Right."

Crack! Ralph put her out of her misery.

"You kids start collecting their weapons and ammo. Fellas, we need to check out the jail."

"I know where it is," Jake offered. "Follow me."

The people were locked in the drunk tank. They had the appearance of warmed over death. There were five men, four women and four children ranging from about 10 to mid teens. While they weren't quite as grubby as Michelle had been, they could all stand a bath. They looked drawn, like they hadn't a decent meal in quite some time.

"I'm Jack. These men are Jonas, Ralph and Jake. We have two youngsters out gathering up firearms. We took care of the group that was holding you prisoner."

"Did you get them all?"

"No, some ran off."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 20

"If there are still some of them left, we can't stay here."

"Are you the spokesman for the group?"

"I suppose. I'm Doctor William Johns."

"As in medical doctor?"

"Family practice."

"I don't suppose you have a minister, do you?"

"That's me. Reverend Samuel Nixon."

"Ok, here's the deal. We're from upstate about 100 miles. These days we're farming and there are vacant farms in our area. We have no shortage of food or most anything else. If you're interesting of getting out of the Capital, we may represent your best chance."

It took them all of two minutes to decide. None of them were farmers but they decided it couldn't be half as bad as what they'd gone through these past years. We had to overcome another obstacle, getting them from the Capital to our area. I had PRI-G and PRI-D, in my pickup out at the post. I also had jumper cables and we decided a school bus might be our best bet. Jan, Andy and I returned to the post while Jonas et al. (Latin: et alia, and others) helped the survivors gather up clothing and any other supplies they might need.

Returning with the pickup, we went directly to the school parking lot and after adding some stabilized diesel and replacing a battery we got a school bus to run. I wanted that Hummer in the worst way and persuaded one of the survivors to drive it back north for me.

"They don't look good," Andy said.

"We get them cleaned up and a decent meal and they'll look better. Do you realize how well off you and your mom were before I met you?"

Since there were teens more Jan's age I sort of figured that she'd latch onto one of them and Andy would be out of luck. It was a quiet trip back that lasted about 2 hours, the limiting factor being the school bus. Without instruction, Andy and Jan began moving the weapons they had gathered to our armory along with the new M-4s.

In the back of my mind, I was planning another trip to the Capital soon. We'd need power systems, the doctor would need medicines and we could look for more LTS food. My mental list didn't take long to become overwhelming.

"Any trouble?"

"Lots. Nothing we couldn't handle. We got another up armored Hummer and mounted a grenade machinegun. We took out the better part of 50 bad guys and rescued 13 people."

"Rescued?"

"The bad guys were holding them prisoner and using them as slaves. They're at the big farm getting cleaned up and having something to eat. There were teenage boys among the survivors."

"Andy is going to end up with a broken heart."

"Could be. It might be a little early to say, but I had the same thought. Jan didn't seem to react much to the people her own age."

"You also said better part of 50 bad guys, did you take prisoners?"

"No, they ran off."

"In other words, there some unaccounted for bad guys out there."

"That's one way to look at it."

"Why didn't you hunt them down?"

"Too many places to look, too little time."

"Something else to worry about."

"Same worry on a reduced scale. At the moment, we should be able to handle anything except armor or artillery. By the way, one of the survivors is a doctor and a second is a preacher. Sure will be nice to have a doctor, we've been very lucky, so far. I think we'll be making a second trip to the Capital to pick up medical supplies, power systems and additional LTS food."

"Are you going to be able to find more large generators?"

"Might not need them. With wind and solar, we might be able to get by with smaller generators to recharge the batteries."

"How many people did you rescue?"

"Thirteen. Five men, four women and four kids ranging from about ten to mid-teens."

"An odd number."

"The minister, Reverend Nixon, must be in his mid to late sixties. They'll be able to pair up, if they want."

"Let's go, I want to meet them. Nancy, we're going to the big farm to meet the survivors."

The pickup was getting crowded with we four, Nancy and Jan, Steve and Michelle. We packed in tightly for the short trip. Jan was all but sitting on Andy's lap and he was blushing. We're either going to have to start taking both pickups or add chairs to the back. In another year or two, I plan on teaching Andy how to drive. He can almost reach the pedals now. For her part, all that Jan needs is more practice driving.

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Once we got there, our women joined with the women from the big farm and the four we had rescued. Talk about a hen party. I got the chance to visit with the doctor.

"What was it, doc, a bacteria or a virus?"

"Virus, I think. We used every antibiotic we had and none of them phased it. It's a very strange illness and I don't think the CDC ever gave it a name. We were lucky that they were far enough along to identify that some folks had a genetic immunity. Not enough, though. I've never felt so helpless in my life."

"I was thinking that now that we have a doctor among us, we should go back to the Capital and load up on those medical supplies you might need."

"I brought a few things, Jack. I suppose we should go to the University Hospital and get more. Anyone here have any medical problems?"

"Not that I know of. We've had four babies and Nancy and Jan delivered them. We were lucky there, no breech births or anything out of the ordinary. We have somehow managed to avoid broken bones or any life threatening injuries."

"I know one thing I going to get right of the bat. I've been against guns most of my life. The only reason those people were able to enslave us was they had the guns. I'm going to get a gun and get someone to teach me how to use it. No matter what, I won't be enslaved again."

"We have an ample supply of firearms and some good teachers. That won't be a problem. It's ironic how people who hate guns eventually realize that a gun is the only thing keeping them free and alive. Jefferson knew that, but somewhere along the way, most of the population forgot."

"You had a different gun down in the Capital."

"Yeah, well, when I'm on the farm, I usually go with the old fashioned or so called cowboy guns. In a real fire fight, you need something more appropriate. We have everything from a .50 caliber sniper rifle down to a .22. Can you imagine carrying a M1A in a scabbard on a horse?"

"I have no idea what a M1A is, Jack."

"Civilian version of the M14 rifle the used during the beginning of the Vietnam War. Part way through, they switched to the M16 which was lighter and used lighter ammo. I suppose you could say my big rifle is a 2,000 yard rifle and an M1A is a 1,000 yard rifle while an M16 is about a 500 yard rifle."

"I might like to have one of the M1As."

"We'll have to see what we have and what we picked up in the Capital; I'm running low on those. When you get a chance, would you make up a list of medicine we need to get?"

"I'll make the list, but I'm going with you. It's kind of hard to put everything on a list; I may have to make substitutions."

"Ok. I'll have to talk to the Reverend. We haven't had Church services since the illness and I suppose it's past time we got back to praying. I haven't said a word to a soul, but I was really bitter when the illness took my first wife."

"Then Molly isn't your first wife?"

"Second. I met her over the barrel of a shotgun."

"You'll have to tell me about that sometime."

"I will. Our boy Andy is her son from her first marriage and we have a daughter together. Plus, she is expecting our second child."

"I can see that I have to lie in some prenatal supplies."

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"Reverend, if you'd tell me what to get and where to get it, we'll pick it up when we go to the Capital. I think it's about time we restarted Church Services. Think you can put together sort of a non-denominational service?"

"It's all Christian. I can leave out specifics related to my church and that will be pretty

close."

"What denomination are you? Methodist. However, that doesn't mean much, there are several kinds of Methodists. One of the many differences between the protestant denominations is the baptism. I can dab 'em or dunk 'em, it's all the same to me. We dab and the Baptists dunk. What denomination are you?"

"I was baptized a Methodist, but in later years sort of got away from the church."

"Pretty common, Jack. Take a large church with an average attendance of maybe 700. Of those, probably only 400 are members of the church. You have the sometimes comers and the Easter comers. Plus those that only show up when something really bad happens like the World Trade Center."

"What will you need?"

"It would be easier if I came. Bibles and Hymnals for a start. We can substitute for other things we need. If you go to my church, there are a case of new Bibles and a case of new Hymnals in my office. Just got them in before... you know. They're the New Revised Standard edition. I would like to have my personal Bible, it's a St. Joseph New American Bible."

"We have four babies we need to baptize."

"I'll have a talk with the parents and will follow their wishes, not everyone believes in baptizing infants."

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Once we distributed the new people among the farms, we got together to go back to the Capital to acquire power systems for four farms, medicines, Bibles and Hymnals and any LTS food we could locate. We took both Hummers pulling trailers plus four pickups pulling trailers. It was quite the caravan making its way to the Capital. We started by meeting the power requirements while Doc and the Reverend went after what they wanted. While the Reverend declined to take a firearm, the Doc wasn't as reticent. I ended up giving him my standard model M1A until we could work something out.

It took the full day to load the power systems and we had ample room for the food. The second day we went looking and found an empty semi tractor-trailer rig parked against a grocery store loading dock. We fooled around with it until we got it to run. The store had been trashed but in a city the size of the Capital, that didn't present a problem. We filled the empty spaces in our vehicles plus the semi with the LTS stocks from other stores. We found a gun store that hadn't been ransacked and got Doc a Loaded M1A and a SA .45. We didn't take that many guns, they were running out of our ears.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 21

I used my backhoe to dig the bases for the wind turbine towers. The others got the concrete and filled the holes two at a time. Still others were installing solar panels and using my system as a guide. We were short on batteries, but a trip to the golf course remedied that. There were a few new and many old golf cart batteries. It was a matter of making do with what we had. I think we scrounged every auto parts store in town and the Dodge dealer to get enough battery cables.

It slowly came together and I was home putting in the garden. Doc made a trip to town and located several small 14ft² freezers. The LTS food was distributed until everyone had about the same amount. On their own, four men and four women paired off and the Reverend moved in with Jonas. Our community, or whatever you call it, was growing. It seemed as if all the women were expecting, excluding Jan and the two teenage girls from the Capital. That was a brother-sister, brother-sister deal and it appeared they'd end up related, sometime in the future. Jan didn't give either of those boys the time of day. When they said something, she'd take Andy's arm in her hands sending that message, again.

This round of pregnancies had the added benefit of prenatal care, mostly just vitamins and occasional doctor visits. Doc went to them, not the other way around. We still had a few needs that couldn't be met, like more CB radios and so forth. Those two Hummers had military radios and I discovered by talking on one and having Molly listen to the scanner that they were encrypted. Another thing we should get from the National Guard, enough encrypted radios to go around plus instructions on how to set them up and use them.

I think you may be beginning to see that there was rarely a dull moment. Being a farmer was much different from being the assistant manager of the feed store in town. We mostly sold feed, and some seed, but it came in by the truckload, both bulk and bagged. The local elevator handled most of the bulk feed making our major business bagged feed. At least I knew the proper feed to give to our breeding stock. We started breeding more heifers, primarily to increase our herds but secondarily to get more milk so Mary Alice could make cheese.

You know, people probably don't think about it much. I'm talking about the food we eat. I've had this craving for a cheeseburger since the illness. As it happens we didn't have any cheese and I don't know why, but I never thought to get cheese from any of the grocery stores until it had gone bad. Plus, it never occurred to me I could use Cheez Whiz in a pinch. Molly remedied that but it just wasn't the same; close, but different. For the record, Velveeta is pasteurized process cheese spread and Velveeta Light is pasteurized process cheese product. Cheez Whiz is labeled as pasteurized process cheese sauce, although that type isn't noted in the Code of Federal Regulations. A Kraft spokeswoman confirmed that the word "sauce" just seems to be an add-on. They were all sold by Kraft.

With the number of people here, our house I mean, something had to give. We had been okay when Nancy and Jan came, they took the third bedroom. We moved Steve in with Andy and were still ok. Kenzie slept with us, no problem there, but Michelle was a separate issue. Molly and I decided we'd have to clear a place in the basement and move the boys down there so Michelle could have Andy's bedroom. It wasn't fair but there it is, life isn't fair. We could move Kenzie in with Michelle when the baby came a temporary solution at best, what if Molly got pregnant again?

"We're running out of room."

"We'll be ok unless I have another baby."

"Still the kids are growing up and will need places of their own."

"Are you thinking about Jan and Andy?"

"I hadn't but that's a consideration too. Maybe we should build a new house."

"In place of or in addition to this house?"

"In addition. We really don't have any shortage of building materials and we have plenty of time. I'd say about two years."

"Do you know enough about construction to build it?"

"Not by myself, Molly. There are 8 other men who can help and we can have a house raising instead of a barn raising."

"Where would you build it?"

"Probably right next door to this house. I wouldn't want to get any closer to the barns. I would use my backhoe to dig a basement, we could get the forms and pour basement walls, put in plumbing and pour the basement floor. A hot water heater wouldn't be a problem but I don't know where to get a wood or coal burning furnace."

"Let me check a few places and maybe I can up with something."

"What did you have in mind?"

"A Fire Chief Wood and Coal burning furnace. Andrew and I considered one at one time."

"If you can find one, I'll go get it."

"Were you thinking of a propane hot water heater, stove and dryer?"

"I think so, we already have the tanks. I think that there are two more solar and wind setups down in the Capital. If I go there, I might as well get both sets and eliminate a trip. If we can get enough 2x6 lumber, we'll build thicker walls and use more insulation. What do you think 4 bedrooms?"

"How big of a family were you planning on having?"

"I hadn't given it much thought. I know that I love keeping in practice."

"You're just a dirty old man."

"I am not old!"

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She had tested my assertion and I'm not sure but, I think she agrees. When I had free time, I determined where I wanted to build the home and staked it out. I had a roughly drawn floor plan for a home with 4 bedrooms and a bath on the upper floor and the master bedroom with a private bath on the main floor. There was room for a formal dining room that would seat up to a dozen people, and a kitchen with a large pantry. The laundry would be on the main floor.

"There you go, 36x72, two story. Big enough?"

"Can you imagine hold long that will take to clean?"

"You're not short of help, I'm sure that Nancy and Jan will pitch in and it won't be long before Michelle can help."

"If you turn me into a baby factory, I'm going to have trouble keeping my figure."

"I won't love you any less."

"You say that now, just you wait."

"I'll say the same thing, no matter what. Would you like to run down to the Capital with me? Might be a good time to get the solar and wind power."

"I located a furnace dealer and they're in the Capital so we can kill two birds with one stone."

"I think I'll ask Ralph to come down with us, he's our military specialist. You know we didn't get all of those guys."

"Is it safe?"

"I'm not sure, do you think we should take more people?"

"Jonas, Jake and Ralph."

"I'll ask, but they're busy planting."

"It would only take one day and we'd have more vehicles."

o

"I don't know why I let you talk me into this, Jack. I thought we were done going to the Capital."

"As I said, were running out of room and need another house. We can get most of the things we need in the Capital and we'll be back by sundown."

I was enthused about the new home and maybe let it get the better of my good judgment. Molly had a point, we hadn't gotten all of the MZBs. Jonas was right too, we really need to get the crops in, especially since we'd added another 13 people. Conversely, we were only talking about one day, probably a six hour round trip. Nonetheless, Ralph insisted we take the two Hummers and two pickups, all pulling trailers. I'd added a tool box to my pickup, a place to carry rockets, grenades and extra ammo even though we wouldn't need it.

We left right after we had the chores done and didn't encounter anyone on our way, as was usual. We zipped in behind the power store and began loading the supplies. Molly told Ralph where she needed to go to get the wood burning furnace and they took off to get it. Jonas, Jake and I made short work of loading the solar and wind equipment, but couldn't find enough batteries. I grabbed the Yellow Pages and found the address for a golf cart repair shop. I gave Ralph and Molly a call telling them where we were going and asked them to meet us there.

Ralph said the furnace was heavy and they were having a problem getting it loaded.

"Ralph, Jonas says we'll come help with that then go after the golf cart batteries. Where are you?"

Molly came on the radio and gave me concise directions, to a place only 3 miles away. We locked the place up and Jonas and Jake led the way. We were almost there when BAMM, someone opened up on us. I couldn't see them and neither could Jake who was our gunner. We put the pedal to the metal and almost made it before that SOB shot a hole in the tailgate of my pickup. With two points of reference and the angle of the bullets, I had a good idea where he, or she, was.

"You guys go ahead. I think I know where he is and I'm going to get him. I'm really po'd."

"Is that wise?"

"I don't care. I'll pull around the corner and stop. If I don't join you in 15 minutes, come back and get me."

Once the truck was parked, I got my M25, 2 hand grenades and one LAW rocket. I entered a near building and climbed the stairs to the roof. I drop the bipod legs and used the scope to look back at the way we came. Another shot rang out throwing concrete chips in my face. I reached up and there was a little blood and I was getting angrier. I finally spotted him and his rifle was pointed at me as my rifle was pointing at him. It was a Carlos Hathcock situation but I wasn't that good of shot. Besides, he was less than 100 yards away. I extend the tube on the LAW until it clicked in place, carefully sighted and squeezed on the top strap.

There was one hell of an explosion about where he was, but I couldn't tell if I got him or not. I folded the bipod legs back up and moved to flank his position. Jumping from roof to roof wasn't my idea of fun but in time I got to him. He was lying bleeding and moaning.

"Well, Pilgrim, what's your story?"

"Help me, I'm hurt."

"I sure hope so. Why did you shoot at us?"

"You're part the bunch that attacked a few days ago and I couldn't let you get away with that."

"I suppose you're going to claim you are a good guy forced by you captors, against your will, to join the shooting party."

"You took some of the survivors, they know better than that and you would soon."

It appeared to me that he was bleeding out but I wasn't about to stand here waiting for that to happen. BAMM. "May God have mercy on your soul, but don't hold your breath."

He had a nice revolver and an even nicer rifle. I grabbed both and returned to my pickup. We still hadn't had time to install the CBs in the Hummers or SINCGARS in the pickups so I just drove to the shop where they were loading the furnace.

"You ok? We heard a big explosion?"

"Finally got a chance to use one of those LAW rockets. Didn't kill him though and I ended up shooting him."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 22

"You're hurt."

"He got a little close, got hit with a concrete fragment."

"Let me see." She wiped of the blood and said, "I need one of those large band-aids. You're right, it isn't much but how dare you scare me out of 10-years of life."

At this rate, she'd be dead before she reached 40. After, Molly didn't say word, she just glared at me. Jonas sad he wanted to make another stop, at a Sear's warehouse. We got our new propane stove, a 75-gallon propane water heater, new washer and propane dryer. They managed to squeeze in 5 of the 25ft² freezers, all the warehouse had. We had one final stop, the golf cart repair shop. We took all the batteries we could, getting more than we needed and headed out of town.

"I'm going to paint a bullseye on your back."

"I said before we came that some of them ran off. At least that guy won't bother us again. And unless it's something critical, I don't plan on coming back. I picked up a pair of nice guns, a Colt Python and another Super Match."

"You really stuck on those M1As, aren't you?"

"They may well be one of the finest rifles the US military adopted. Yes, I like M1As. They have enough power, are very accurate and are durable. I couldn't just leave it lay and rust. We're well on the way to building the house. We have most of the major appliances and about the only thing we need is a refrigerator."

"Every time you go out salvaging, I lose another year of life."

o

If you think my first summer over worked me, this year was worse. I worked on the basement excavation on the weekends and worked all week on the garden and some of the chores. When I was ready to pour, I went to the lumber yard and got enough lumber to form the footing/foundation. This was all weekend work, but I said I had two years and it appeared I might need it. I got the foundation in and the dug the trenches for water, sewer and electricity. I planned on using my portable generator for a backup generator in my 1-2-3 power set up.

When I was ready to put in the walls, I went to Jonas and asked for their help. They came over on a Saturday and Sunday and helped me set the forms, promising to come back next weekend and pour the walls. I modified the plans and added a ¾ bathroom to the basement – shower, stool and vanity with a sink. We had added a coal room which would increase the amount coal we could store, but it was bigger house. At least, this

time, I changed the plans before we poured the floor.

We poured the next weekend and the weekend after that, pulled the forms. Dang, this is a huge basement. This year I planted wheat again, it stores forever and doesn't go bad. The wheat straw makes nice bedding for the livestock. Non-farmers farming led to a steep learning curve but we were getting better and they rotated the crops over at Jonas's place.

Once the floor was in, I determined where I wanted the stairs and would leave room for the battery racks underneath. The next step was putting in the floor joists so I could seal the basement with OSB or plywood. In many respects OSB has replaced plywood, for one thing, it's cheaper. I wasn't paying so I used plywood and contractors glue to glue it to the joists before I nailed it in place. That took another weekend.

The following weekend, all nine of us did the framing and it began to look like a house. Once we get the shell sealed, I can work all winter on the inside. Instead of finding windows to fit according to the plan, I made the plan fit the available windows. We added insulation, construction board and siding after we had the roof on and the OSB in place. Finally, we laid tarpaper and asphalt shingles sealing the home.

"I need a weekend or two off."

"Don't stop now, it's beginning to look like a home."

"Sorry Molly, no can do. Just a couple of weekends, then I get back on it. Baby kicking yet?"

"A little."

"Doc say everything is ok?"

"He says I'm fine, but it's not his back that hurts."

"The stairs are in, want to take a tour?"

"Sure."

o

Me and my big mouth. Molly brought a pad and began to write down the furnishings we would need. A king size bed, bedroom suite, a sofa, two recliners and two occasional chairs, coffee table, end tables, lamps, dining room table, chairs, hutch, small breakfast table for the kitchen and that was just the main floor. Upstairs, full size beds in all four bedrooms with dressers and desks and for the basement, shelving. Carpet in the bedrooms, vinyl in the kitchen and bathrooms, hard wood floors in the living room and dining room. Gonna take a month of Sundays to haul it from town or wherever we can find

it, if we can find it.

First, I had to finish the plumbing and electrical and get the drywall up. Might use paneling, that's easier. I realized that once winter came, she'd probably have me working 7 days a week to finish up. I also thought that the closer it became to looking like a home, the harder she might push. She was clearly excited at the prospect of our having a new home. We planned on leaving Nancy and Jan in our old home, possibly with Steve and Michelle.

Wiring, check. Plumbing, check. Paneling, check. Drywall, check. Paint, check. Vinyl, check. Hardwood floors, check. Carpet, check. Kitchen cabinets, check. Plumbing fixtures, check. Except for the furniture, the home was done. I had all the help I needed, thank God. Plus I had a brand spanking new baby daughter, named Julia Anne Brown. We had the crib and high chair, did we need two?

Yes, the home was done, but I hadn't put up curtains or drapes. I hadn't hauled the furniture she had yet to select. Man, I thought Lincoln freed the slaves. Did I wire in cable and telephone? Yes, although we'll probably never need them. Was I sure the portable generator would be large enough if we lost wind and solar? I think so, but I'm not sure. In that case, where can you get a bigger generator? I have no idea, the Capital? Oh, that place...find another place.

By spring, we were ready to move, a whole year ahead of schedule. That consisted primarily of moving clothes because we had new plates, silverware, kitchen utensils, new appliances, new everything. I'd been rode hard and put up wet. I was also caught in a quandary; do we pop out one baby a year or skip years? Before I could take precautions, we were moved and Molly was expecting again. Well, I suppose if push comes to shove, we can double the kids up, two to a bedroom, or build more bedrooms in the basement.

I know I glossed over the house building, but I didn't have much time to write, I was really busy hammering nails, etc. I had plenty of help, but I owed them, if they decided to do something similar. Who are they? Everyone who helped. Our little rural group was growing by leaps and bounds, most of the ladies were doing their part to reestablish the population and we men were more than happy to do our part.

By now, Andy was 13½ and Jan and he was 'a thing'. Wait, he's 14½, I lost a year, somewhere, time flies when you're really busy. And, come to think about it, I suspected that Jan and he were more than 'a thing'. I can't put my finger on it, but they somehow seemed different, whatever that means. He's grown into a fine young man and still has some growing to do. He has taken over teaching Steve the ins and outs of farm work and Jan has taken over teaching Michelle. Then one bright spring day, Jonas had a heart attack.

"How's he doing Doc?"

"It's not like I have a full hospital, Jack, I'm doing what I can. I have him on a blood thinner, 100% oxygen, nitro, I am monitoring him with an ekg and am doing my best to keep him out of pain and his blood good. But, I don't have a lab and can't run blood tests, they're important, you know."

"Is he going to make it or not?"

"Yeah. Fifty-fifty at this point under these circumstances I'm a family practice physician, not a cardiologist."

I'd seen reruns of Emergency and they used terms like blood gases, electrolytes, Lidocaine, sodium bicarb, epinephrine and others I can't remember. We had our first real emergency, Jonas's life was at stake and Mary Alice was beside herself. I offered to pitch in and do some of the work on the big farm that Jonas had been doing, if it was needed. Andy could do most of the stuff on our farm now.

o

"Well?"

"He'll make it, but with limitations. Real limitations. He will have to change his diet, get lots of exercise, limit the heavy work he does. We're working in a pre-modern medicine situation here. I've been doing some reading, have him on some cardiac drugs and we'll have to see how that works out."

"I offered to help."

"Mary Alice's boy, Tim, is getting old enough to do some of that. They aren't farming all of the land."

We had been growing, but this was a step back. Jonas was the leader of the clan and by far the hardest worker. Sort of makes one think of one's own mortality. In the time since the illness, we'd had extremely good luck, and that's an understatement. Jonas's ailment brought to mind the old wives tale that bad things happen in threes. It wasn't like we had a lot of exposure, limiting our travels to town, the other two towns and the Capital. We'd proved our mettle in a gun battle and everyone kept in practice, sort of a community rule.

While we hadn't gone back to the Capital, per se, we had gone to the National Guard post and swapped out the Hummer with the cracked window and hauled back even more ammo and individual ordinance. We had all of the 7.62 ammo, including that in belts. There was no more of that than M118LR anyway. I'd cornered the market on that special .50 caliber ammo, they only had 20 of the 120 round containers. We had the 5.56 running out of our ears because that was the military's primary caliber.

"Do you see that?"

"See what?"

"Smoke. It looks like it's coming from town."

"I'd better get Ralph and go check it out."

"Be careful. Don't go looking for trouble."

"Get your gun Ralph, there appears to be a fire in town."

"We'll take the Hummer, you drive."

"I'll get my rifles."

As we grew closer to town, the fire seemed to be spreading. I pulled up to the overlook and we started looking things over, using binoculars, this time.

"I think that's what they call a well involved outside fire, Jack."

"Yeah, it looks like half the town is burning."

- Well Involved: Term of size-up meaning fire, heat and smoke in a structure are so widespread that internal access must wait until fire streams can be applied.
- Outside fire: Urban fire not inside a building or vehicle, often found to be burning trash which could extend to nearby structures or vehicles if not dealt with properly. A suburban, interface, or rural outside fire could also be a wildland fire.
- Arson: the crime of maliciously (or perhaps recklessly) setting fire to property, especially a dwelling. Punishable in various degrees, depending upon the circumstances. Occasionally occurs as a psychotic act of a mentally ill firefighter.

"I see someone with a flare."

"I see three guys with flares."

"No doubt about it being arson, huh?"

"Don't think so."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 23

"Will that fancy rifle of yours reach that far?"

"It will, but I don't know if I can hit anything."

"Might be worth a shot," Ralph chuckled. "I might just see what ole Ma Deuce can do."

"It must be 2,000 yards."

"Good, they're within range."

With that, the chugga-chugga-chugga began. At this distance and with the sounds from the fires, I doubt they even noticed the .50 caliber rounds until Ralph got the range and began to bring them down.

Why arson? Why not? Maybe they were just having a bad hair day. Maybe they were po'd because the town had been, for the most part, cleaned out. When Ralph had downed all of the people we could see, we just let the town burn and returned home.

"Most of the town is gone. Arson. Ralph got most of the people setting the fires with the Ma Deuce."

"They were setting the fires with a Ma Deuce?"

"No, he got them with the Ma Deuce."

"We canned around two hundred and thirty quarts of produce from the garden today. Tomorrow were going to make several kinds of pickles, the cucumbers are just the right size. We spent more time on preps than we actually did canning. Would bread and butter, dill and sweet pickles be enough?"

"Are there any other kinds?"

"Pickled eggs with red chili peppers. "

"Just variations on the theme. We could make kosher dills with garlic, Polish pickles or Swedish pickles."

"You can just stick with the original three you mentioned. Do you have everything you need? Spices, vinegar, dill, sugar?"

"Couldn't make pickles if we didn't. Oh, ouch."

"What's wrong?"

"I just got kicked good."

"Have you picked out names yet?"

"If it's a boy, we'll still go with John Jacob Brown, Jr. and if it's a girl, how about Sarah Jean Brown?"

"It's getting so I need a play card to know the players. Creating our own girls basketball team, are we?"

The names were: Mackenzie Susan Brown, Julia Anne Brown and with my luck Sarah Jean Brown. I said as long as they're healthy, but a boy would be a nice change up. A girl's basketball team, ok; a girl baseball team, no way. On average, the girls were about 15 months apart.

o

That day I was in the field harvesting wheat, Jan came out and said I was needed at the house, Jonas was sick. He had been reasonable when it came to following Doc orders, but reasonable is far from perfect. I half expected he'd get himself in trouble again and end up almost totally invalidated. I wasn't prepared for him dying on us. When I got to the house, Molly said, "Jonas died, apparent heart attack."

"We'd better go over and comfort Mary Alice."

"You go, I'm near full term and I'd better stay here. It's getting hard to move around."

I concluded she didn't mean for me to comfort Mary Alice other than offer our condolences. When I got there the Reverend was comforting Mary Alice and I only had a few words with her. The Doc was there and I asked him what happened.

"I think he got clogged up again, despite the aspirin. I told him to cut down on red meat and greasy foods, but he wouldn't. I'm no closer than I was when he had his first heart attack although I have been reading some Cardiology texts. Most of the procedures require a medical team of specialists, and I'm closer to an old time country doctor."

"Take two aspirin and call me in the morning?"

"Something like that. We need you to bring your backhoe over and dig the hole."

"Aren't you going to do an autopsy?"

"Wouldn't make him any less dead. At best it would confirm or disprove my assertions."

"Tomorrow ok?"

"If you make it early morning. Can't hold him long, no refrigeration."

"I'll go get the tractor now. Ask Mary Alice where she wants the grave."

It doesn't take that long to dig a 6x6x3' hole. She wanted the grave under a tree but I talked her out of it because of the roots. I told her we could plant a tree that would grow to provide shade for the grave. It was hard on her because she'd lost her first husband to the illness and her second to a heart attack and we couldn't wait 3 days to have the funeral. Except the funeral was just your basic interment with a brief graveside service.

The following day I got back to the field and finished the wheat harvest. When I got back from the field, Nancy told me that Molly was in labor and Doc was on his way. It seemed like Doc was getting a real workout these days. Sarah Jean Brown weighed around 7 pounds and was around 20" long. We'd move Kenzie to a bed, leave Julia in a crib and use the second crib for Sarah. Musical beds...

"Dad, Jan and I are going to pair up."

"You're not even 15 Andy, don't you think you're rushing it?"

"It's either that or Nancy will come after me with her shotgun."

"How long has this been going on?"

"For a while. You're not mad are you?"

"I'm not the one you have to worry about. What's your mother going to say?"

"I was hoping you'd tell her."

"No sir. You started it, you finish it. I'll stick my nose in only if it gets out of hand."

At the time, I was concerned although this wasn't totally unexpected. It brought to mind what Ronald Reagan had said when he learned that Israel had bombed Osiraq, "Well, boys will be boys."

I waited while Andy broke the news to his mom and then put in my appearance. Andy looked distressed and Molly was deadly silent. Finally she said, "You could have waited." That was it, end of subject, with Andy.

"Did you know?"

"Not until he told me a few minutes ago. He wanted me to speak to you first and I told him he started it and he'd have to finish it."

"At least with Preacher here they can get married."

"Even without Preacher, they can exchange vows, like we did."

"I wonder what Nancy will say?"

"Are you going to tell her?"

"I'd say that it's Jan's responsibility. She's old enough that she must have expected this to happen."

"Nancy or Jan?"

"Jan."

"He could do worse."

"That's true; she is a rather nice girl, just a bit liberal for my tastes."

"Why would you say that, Molly? I recall a night long ago when my door opened and you were very liberal with me."

"That's different, I was a widow with a son."

"And now your son is a man with all the rights and responsibilities that entails. He's going to be a family man. Aren't you glad now that we built the second house?"

"It is a nice house. I just wish he'd waited until he was a little older, like maybe 18."

I let her get over it. All the talking in the world wouldn't change the facts. Mary Kay Letourneau had been impregnated by a 13-year-old. Jan had to have known what she was getting into and had done it willingly. There hadn't been any assertion, so far, that Andy had done anything wrong, just that he exercised poor judgment. Nancy took it in stride, better than Molly had. They visited together and then with the kids. The decision was that Michelle would move in with us, Andy and Jan would take the second bedroom and Steve would stay in his bedroom at the old house. There would be no wedding, but vows would be exchanged, rather soon, I imagined.

o

Mary Alice was expecting, as were all three of the women on the big farm and she was without a companion, husband, ergo unpaired. I was rather surprised when the good Reverend stepped in to fill the role. He looked older than he actually was, according to Sue. Almost everyone was now paired up or married except for the smaller children, Steve and Michelle. One of these days, they'll pair up too, if I'm any judge. It was like I told you about the brother-sister, brother-sister deal they were now paired up, brother 1 with sister 2, etc. We were doing our Christian duty, being fruitful and multiplying. Gene-

sis 1:28

On account of Molly's complaint about losing her figure, we were spacing our children, allowing her to get back in shape before we did it all over again and got her out of shape again. It didn't get any easier but she really worked at it. I wouldn't have minded if she hadn't but it was nice that she thought enough of herself that it was important to her. I said earlier that bad things happen in threes. That was when Jonas had his first heart attack. A criminal element came into town and burned it down and that makes two. Jonas had a second, fatal, heart attack and I think that makes three. If I'm right, and I sure hope I am, that should take care of it for a while.

This immunity thing didn't seem to be particularly selective, either you had it or you didn't. It didn't matter if you were a survivalist, a prepper or an ultra liberal gun hater. You live or you died. You either had the recessive gene pair or you didn't. All of the other survivors had the recessive gene pair. Would there be a price to pay for having the recessive gene pair? Those that survived be they survivalist, prepper or ultra liberal had to overcome that were they to survive beyond the illness. Witness the examples that Doc and the Reverend set. Enslaved liberals.

Aside from the unusual occurrences, like fires and heart attacks, unexpected pregnancies and unusual pairings, I was stuck on that, *Is this all there is* question. Don't get me wrong, it's not bad, by any means; Molly is my dream girl come true, certainly more than I had a right to expect when I buried Nancy. I guess maybe God gave us both a second chance. I found myself becoming a bit more religious, better about attending Sunday services. I took time out to thank God, for everything. Not quite like Jimmy Stewart who, in *Shenandoah*, said, *Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat, amen.*

I could identify with the movie character, we or members of our community, did what Stewart described. In time, we wouldn't find anything in any grocery store, anywhere. We'd produce it or go without. All the more reason to get good at our new craft, farming. We could settle for lower yields provided we could find seed that bred true. There were hundreds of acres that we weren't planting. Next year, I was going to plant soybeans and fix some nitrogen in my soil.

I learned about nitrogen from a book in the library. We took some books but hadn't gotten them all when the library burned down. When we'd checked the houses, we turned off all the pilot lights, just to avoid a fire. I was glad Ralph gunned them down. I had sniper rifles but it takes more than a rifle to make a sniper. A real sniper could shoot further than I could and under varying circumstances. They could sneak up on a target undetected. They could shoot and sneak away, still undetected. Real snipers, like Gunny Hathcock. A prepper who only had AR-15s for himself and his wife and a pair of 9mm pistols couldn't even defeat a disease.

In The Aftertime – Chapter 24

Sometimes, late at night, I still miss her. "Who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead." 1 Peter 4:5 In that context, quick means alive. I guess that means that Nancy's dead.

As soon as Molly had Kenzie potty trained, the diaper went and she became daddy's little cowgirl. Not old enough to ride a horse, but we had a new Morgan foal, a filly, who would be ready when Kenzie was ready. I had great plans and acted accordingly. For example, I had a Ruger Bearcat that she could start with using shorts and graduate to a Single Six and a 9422. At a later age, she'd have heavier caliber cowboy guns and a Browning High Power plus a LWRC short piston 6.8 Remington SPC carbine.

Cold cruel world? Don't know, could be; so far we've had our ups and downs, mostly ups. Things are running out and there isn't any industry that I know of. We went from an agrarian society to an industrial society back to an agrarian society. Those of us that survived and had good durable goods were in good shape and the world was now filled with haves and have-nots. We had, others didn't.

"Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat, amen."

"What are you doing?"

Musing."

"About what?"

"Many things. The quick and the dead, daddy's little cowgirl, us returning to the land and the movie *Shenandoah*."

"That's a strange mix."

"It means, 'To be absorbed in one's thoughts; engage in meditation.'"

"I know what it means."

"They were just random thoughts. I thought about Nancy first and then my thoughts turned to Kenzie. That got me to think about that foal that should be ready for her when she is ready for her. The foal led my thoughts to our new agrarian society and that to thoughts about haves and have-nots. And I remembered Jimmy Stewart's blessing of the food in *Shenandoah*. I buried Nancy out back. Where did you bury Andrew?"

"I don't know. They picked up his body and that was the last we saw of him. There was

a lot of that in town. I don't know where they took him, I assumed the mortuary but when I called, there was no answer. Then the phones went down. And then those three guys..."

"I didn't mean to open a wound."

"That's ok, I've been over it for a long time. Andy shot two of them and I cut the other one open from the crotch to his breast bone, all the while screaming, 'try to rape me, would you?' It wasn't a request."

All things come to him that waits. Remind me not to try to make love to her unless she wants to. This past month had been something, Jonas dying, Molly having daughter number three and Andy announcing that Jan and he were in a family way. I needed something to distract me and got Andy and Steve so we could go cut down more of the marked trees that provided our firewood for the stove in the pole barn and the fireplace in the living room of our new home. Didn't mention that, I guess, another of Molly's ideas and I liked it because it could always provide another source of heat. Not much, fireplaces aren't that efficient, but it dressed up the living room.

'Ah, all things come to those who wait,'
(I say these words to make me glad),
But something answers soft and sad,
'They come, but often come too late.'

o

Jake took over in Jonas's place as leader of the clan on the big farm. Ralph didn't seem to mind, when he wasn't farming, he was playing with his boy toys. Should something happen to Jake, it seemed likely Ralph would step up because the Preacher, being a preacher, was almost totally passive. I think he's what some would call a sheeple. He had his role, spreading God's love to all of us and occasionally reminding us we had something to look forward to.

Right, a girl's basketball team. I don't know what Molly used, but she managed to avoid getting pregnant until she got her figure back and it was taking longer each time. If she spread the babies out, we'd have children ranging in age from newborns to teenagers, perhaps even older. I suggested that around age 40, she might want to consider stopping having children, to which she responded, "We'll see."

A century earlier, before the major industrial revolution, during our first agrarian society, farmers had large families to provide labor to work the farm. Then, the industrial revolution spread to the farm and farmers began using reapers, tractors and it became possible to farm with less help. The farmer usually left the farm to the oldest son and any younger siblings left the farm, often for good. Contrast that with now, we have more land than we have people to work it. What's the point of growing huge herds if there is no one to eat the meat, milk, cheese, bacon and pork chops?

We maintained light security, as in never leave home without your handgun. The overall lack of attacks against our community of farms had a negative effect, causing us to reduce our security over time. We eventually paid for that, the most distant farm was overrun and we didn't know about it for days. The occupants, some of the people we rescued from the Capital were dead, anything of value taken and we only discovered it by accident when another of the rescued survivors went to check on his neighbor who he hadn't heard from.

"We're going to have to set up a roving patrol," Ralph said.

"Can we spare the people Ralph?"

"Does it matter? It was just a matter of time until the not so good survivors showed up. We had a taste of that when they burned down the town. We've had a second taste and this one's much closer to home. There is always an element that would rather steal than grow. Is there any shortage of farmland? No. Are there people willing to help get them started? Yes. Will they take the help? Not as long as they can steal the finished goods."

"Did they take the livestock?"

"Not all of it, we're going to have to redistribute what they left until we can find another couple to take over that farm."

"Sounds like we need to go hunting. First, we hunt down the MZBs and eliminate them. Second, we hunt down more families for our farming community."

"It would be far easier to find more families and establish a roving security patrol. If those bad guys think they got away with it, they'll come back when they run out of food. I think our best bet might be to station the two Hummers on or near the most distant farms. We'll put the Ma Deuce at the farm they overran and the Mk 19 in the other direction. Or, if you'd rather, we can equip both of the Hummers with the two Ma Deuces."

"Can't we reason with them?"

"I don't think so Preacher. You need to start developing that praise the Lord and pass the ammunition mentality."

"I carry a handgun."

"True, but are you willing to use it?"

"I've used it."

"Where?"

"On the range, Mary Alice insisted."

"Paper targets don't shoot back Preacher. Could you use the handgun to shoot another human being?"

"If the circumstance warranted."

"And, who's to say if the circumstances warrant it?"

"Well, I would of course."

"I thought so. Ralph are you up to a hunting trip to find more families to grow our community?"

"Just say when, Jack."

"Ok, Andy will drive the Hummer and you'll man the gun. You will be pulling a trailer with extra fuel. I'll drive my pickup, pull a trailer and Jan will come with me. I'd rather take someone other than Jan, but she insists. She's not so far along that her pregnancy should be a problem. She has that HK93 and isn't half bad."

"Don't forget to bring your extra individual ordinance."

"Already packed in the toolbox with some up front."

"When do we leave?"

"Sun up?"

"Sounds good, which way?"

"The MZBs came from the west, so I say we try to the east. There are several medium sized cities that way."

"I've gotten a roving patrol set up to cover the community while we're gone. They start tonight."

o

"Do you have to go, Jack?"

"Yes, Molly, I do. Andy wanted to come and since he's a man now, that's his decision. I couldn't talk Jan out of going along, where he goes, she goes."

"I'd go, but someone has to take care of the girls."

"If you weren't nursing, I'd love to have you come along. Don't think I want to take a baby, though. Ralph has set up the roving patrol and they start tonight. We will be out of here by dawn and plan to go east."

"Just be careful."

"I will be. I have a wonderful wife, three lovely daughters and am expecting a grandchild. All the more reason to be careful."

"No heroics, Jack. If someone shoots at you from a roof and you get away, stay away."

"Molly, it will depend on the circumstances. I'll avoid trouble when I can; I can't promise any more than that."

"Let's get a shower and go to bed."

o

Unable to find a man pack SINGARS, the 12 volt model, we did get some of those Spearhead hand held radios allowing us to remain in contact with the Hummer. The man pack was on my list of things to look for, but finding more people was much more important. As I pointed out, with 2,000 people surviving the illness, surely somewhere in the region of 1,000 must have survived in the aftermath. Although, at the moment, we seemed to be losing people as fast as they were replaced and all those babies had to grow up.

We proceeded slowly, checking out communities as we went, ever mindful that we could find good people or MZBs. Reflecting back, I'd believed that Nancy and I would be spared the illness because we were rural and had a self-imposed quarantine. That hadn't worked out and I had no reason to believe that rural people had any better chance than townfolk. It boiled down to a single fact, the immunity. And, with 0.1% of the population being immune, one could guess the size of the population in any given community and be close. After two days of travel we hadn't found anyone. We discussed it over dinner.

"Why are we looking in towns, Jack? It seems to me that as long as it's been since the illness, people would have moved to the country, like we did, and started to farm."

"Any suggestions on how we find them?"

"You know the answer to that, look for the smoke."

"A person can't see smoke from a single farm from very far away. While the area isn't totally flat, I haven't seen any rises that would give us a good view of the country side. Plus there's the question that came up before, *why would an established farmer want to move?* I still think we'd be better off finding townfolk and teaching them to farm."

"We haven't seen many townsfolk since much after the first year."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 25

"We found Steve and Michelle."

"Two kids in towns where they were the only survivors, isn't what I would call major population centers. Have we found one single family unit that remained intact? Don't answer that, the answer is no."

"There has to be a case where a man with recessive gene married a woman with the recessive gene and they and their children survived."

"The odds are extreme, Jack. Think it out, 0.001 times 0.001 is 0.000001, one chance in a million."

"Which only means that we could have 2 such families in this state."

"Talk about looking for a needle in a haystack. You are talking about two families in an area of maybe 56,000mi²."

"I didn't say it wouldn't be hard to find them."

"This isn't getting us anywhere, I'm turning in."

o

It was a lose if situation, lose if you did and lose if you didn't. Ralph and Andy were right; we couldn't see smoke for very far, if there were any to see. Anyone established wouldn't want to give up what they had for a pig in a poke. Which is why I wanted to check communities. One family in 28,000mi²... Moreover, what are the chances of finding both such families in the same community? Multiply the million by the number of communities in the state, around 1,000, and the odds become 1 in a trillion.

"How much longer, Jack?"

"Let's give it 3 more days. If we can't find anyone by then, we'll start collecting supplies of the unusual things we can't make or grow and work our way home. After you went to bed last night, I got to thinking about the odds of our state having two such families, that's 1 in a million, and the odds of both families being in the same community, 1 in a trillion."

"Do you feel lucky today? Well, do you punk?"

"Dirty Harry?"

"Yeah, first movie. May not have the quote exact, but you get the idea."

"Never say never 'cause never is a mighty long time."

Coincidence? The next community we came to was a mid-sized town about the size of our town. And there, bold as brass were a few people moving around.

"Hello."

"Just you hold right there mister, we'll get our folks."

"What were you saying about the odds, Ralph?"

"We were talking about the odds of an entire family surviving or two such families surviving. The opera ain't over until the fat lady sings."

"You can get out of the pickup now. Keep your hands in plain sight. My name is Richard Middlebury."

"I'm Jack Brown. Quite a bunch of kids, yours?"

"In fact they are."

"Born to you or adopted?"

"My own kids, why?"

"Oh, we were calculating the odds of finding a family that made it through the illness intact. Their mother alive?"

"Why wouldn't she be? Is that what they're calling it now, the illness?"

"That's what we call it. It was a virus and only people with a recessive gene survived."

"Yeah, I heard the talk on TV, something about one-tenth of one percent."

"So far that's been about right. Of course not everyone who survived the illness survived the aftermath. Your family live here in town?"

"We do. We have an empty lot next to us and planted a garden. Been living on canned meat but that's running out."

"Know anything about farming?"

"Not really, I owned a department store."

"Want to learn? You could grow your own beef, pork, chicken and turkeys. Have fresh milk and fresh eggs."

"Well, of course, those things would be nice, but I'm not sure. You see the Ingram children and our children were planning on getting married."

"There's another family?"

"Yes, he's my fourth cousin. His wife is my sister-in-law. And yes, they all survived."

"Hey Ralph, feel like going to Vegas? We'd end up owning the entire town!"

"Don't tell me."

"The wives are sisters and the men are fourth cousins."

"I'll be damned."

"Get out of the Hummer and come meet the folks."

o

Introductions were made all around. Don Ingram actually worked for Richard in his department store before the illness. Nepotism, maybe. Over the course of time, they had almost totally cleaned out the grocery stores and had found heirloom seeds to grow their own food. They weren't really short on anything except fresh meat and dairy products. We learned this when, after persuading them to move, it took a tractor trailer rig to move them and their supplies. Our two trailers and the pickup were loaded down with a wide assortment of clothing from the department store and a pair of specialty shops.

We still had room because both men were driving diesel pickups and pulling trailers. We planned on doing a little shopping for the unusual food items on the way back. My list included things like cinnamon, vanilla, sugar, salt, chili powder, sage and other food items. The kids wanted me to find hot cocoa. We paused in each town on the way back and took what we could find. It wasn't much in any location, but it did add up. Spices and condiments don't take a lot of room meaning that what we had in two pickups and two trailers would last a long time.

"We're back."

"Any trouble?"

"Not one bit."

"Find anyone?"

"What if I told you we found two totally intact families in the same community?"

"As in pre-illness intact? I'd say you were either delusional or lying."

"None the less."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Actually we were figuring the odds of that happening the night before and I concluded the chances were 1 in a trillion. Las Vegas, here I come. The odds of a Royal Flush are much better, about 1:650,000."

◦

What the two families hadn't considered (enough) was that the kids were first cousins, thus the relationship was too close and could lead to genetic problems. As a working definition, unions contracted between persons biologically related as second cousins or closer ($F \geq 0.0156$) are categorized as consanguineous. This arbitrary limit has been chosen because the genetic influence in marriages between couples related to a lesser degree would usually be expected to differ only slightly from that observed in the general population. However, I didn't see how we could stop it or if we had the right to try.

The upside was that close relationships tend create an emphasis on recessive genes and if future generations didn't continue the practice, the effects of inbreeding might be overcome. If Steve and Michelle entered the mix of the Middlebury and Ingram families, that might stir the soup, in a manner of saying. While we had no operative law, the laws of this state forbid marriage between 3rd cousins and up, without consent from a judge. And, only then could third cousins marry, with other unions being strictly prohibited. The key term seemed to be no operative laws.

Here in the time after the illness, some referred to it as the aftertime, it was far different than anything I had imagined. Before the illness, our short list of things that might happen included WW III, a H5N1 pandemic and a remote possibility that Yellowstone would blow its top. More distance possibilities included a tsunami caused by La Palma breaking apart and falling into the ocean and an abrupt climate change. Yes, the earth was warming up, but was that a natural occurrence or did mankind have something to do with it? Scientists said the earth went through cycles as evidenced by the Younger Dryas, the Medieval Warm period and the Little Ice Age. Some said it depended on variations in the amount of sunlight. I don't believe that anyone knew for sure.

◦

"You said the mothers are sisters, right?"

"That what I was told."

"Lots of kids?"

"Six apiece."

"Evenly divided?"

"Three boys and three girls in each family, not exactly the same ages, but close enough."

"That won't work."

"Why not?"

"They're too closely related. They'd be first cousins and it would be considered as incest. We have the law for a reason; they'll have all kinds of problems with their kids."

"First cousin marriages have occurred for years, Molly."

"I didn't claim they didn't. All I said was they were illegal in this state and there was an increased risk of genetic defects."

"I don't want to get in a fight with the Middlebury and Ingram families. Whether we agree or not, it isn't our business. With so few people in our community, we needed new blood to avoid the very thing you're discussing."

"Yeah huh?"

"Where are we going to put them?"

"I think we'll put the Middlebury's on the vacant farm and add another farm close by. We don't want to get too spread out, that may have been the cause of our recent loss of the group of survivors on that farm. Besides, we don't have that much farm equipment and I don't want to go looking for more."

"What, you suddenly decided you want to stay home? What about that wanderlust?"

"Well, with three children and a lovely wife maybe I should stay home more."

"Four."

What?"

"Four children. At least it will be in about 7 months."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 26

"A bit soon, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm not getting any younger and I ran out of Norform inserts."

"Is that how..."

"They usually work. You're not unhappy, are you?"

"Not at all, I'm delighted. We'll just have our basketball team sooner. Maybe we'll get a boy this time."

We did our butchering and located another freezer for the Ingram family. We didn't need to give them weapons because they had a whole community to themselves for quite some time and were nearly as well equipped as we were. Ralph factored in the farm the Ingram's selected and extended the patrols. We wanted to have a community Thanksgiving dinner, but lacked a community center where we could hold it. We had to settle on having three group affairs and discussed the possibility of constructing a community center that we could use for gatherings, church services, community meetings and so forth.

If any number of people survive a catastrophe, they seemed likely to form a community as a result of being civilized. It could be a community in a city or town, or a loosely formed community like we had several adjoining farms. If an outsider attacked and we knew about it, the entire community would turn out to lend aid. We had recovered the pumper engine and water tender that a fire department used to fight rural fires from another community to the east after our town was burned down. We had to create a farm pond to provide a source of water and add a high capacity pump to refill the water tender.

Often, farm fires result in the loss of the involved building. The first reason is that it takes a fire department a reasonable amount of time to arrive. Usually, by that time, the building is so well involved that the only thing they can do is protect other buildings. We didn't have a school where we could go to learn firefighting and if we had a fire, we'd have to do the best we could. Our acreage was in about the middle of the community; consequently the fire engine and water tender were parked here.

o

"Jack, we need to take time and build a community center."

"Not a bad idea, Ralph, but where?"

"Your place is in about the middle, how about there?"

"I only have an acreage, Ralph, you have a section."

"Our land is more suitable to farming than your acreage. How about you provide space for the community center and we take over growing your crops on our farm?"

What Ralph was suggesting is called the division of labor. For those in the know, the subject of division of labor and modern management practices came, initially, from Frederick Winslow Taylor. If you know that name, you probably also know the name Peter Drucker, he's dead too.

"When do you want to build it, Ralph, providing I agree?"

"I think it would be better to do it now before the ground freezes. It doesn't need to be fancy, Maybe a pole barn type structure with a concrete floor and insulated walls. We can include a garage for the fire equipment so it doesn't have to sit out in the winter weather. You still have that wind turbine, solar setup put up?"

"It's in my pole barn."

"Do you have enough batteries?"

"I have the ones I was saving as spares. They're new wet cell golf cart batteries."

"Can you power a community center?"

"I can, yes. I had thought to give the wind and solar to the Ingram family."

"Are you sure that the Capital is the only place to get wind and solar?"

"In this state, yes. Might be able to get some in the state to the west. Couple of big communities within 50 miles of the border."

"We'd have to go there and check the Yellow Pages once we got there?"

"Unless you have Yellow Pages for those cities."

"The Ingram family seems to be getting by for now. I say we do the community building first and then go looking for more wind and solar."

"If we do, we'd better take a tractor trailer rig, or maybe two. I don't like the idea of straying that far from home."

"How far is it?"

"About 260 miles. That's about 310 miles for the other community."

"But, it's doable?"

"It's doable."

"What's doable?"

"We were talking about making a trip later on to the state to the west to pick up more solar and wind equipment."

"I thought you told me you were going to stay home from now on."

"I did, Molly."

"And now you're talking about going off again, a longer way from home."

"We were discussing the subject of a trip, not whether or not I'd go."

"Who among our community knows more about wind and solar than you?"

"I might be able to teach them." (Sgt. Schultz, I need help here.)

"And then you'll be worried that you didn't teach them enough and still want to go."

"We can discuss this later, Molly. No decision has been made except to build a community center here on our acreage."

"Humph."

o

We had to go several towns over to find enough materials to build the community building and it turned out to be conventional construction rather than a pole barn. It was oriented so one entire side of the roof faced south. It was well insulated and one more trip to the Capital produced another coal-wood burning furnace, the biggest they had in stock, to heat the place and industrial sized propane stove and ovens. What would a community building be without entertainment? We found a late 20th century jukebox that played CDs. Plus a big screen TV and a combo VHS/Blu-Ray player so we could watch movies. Sorry, no bowling alley.

Molly was in her fifth month when the possibility of the trip out-of-state finally came up. We'd had quite the fight over that after my conversation with Ralph. She stayed mad for at least three days and the subject was dropped, like a hot rock. Had she assumed that she'd won the argument? I was simply happy that we weren't arguing. All the men worked on the building making certain that it was wrapped so we could continue to work inside and finish it. We set the batteries but the ground was frozen and the tower would have to wait as would the solar until we made our trip. Did I say we? She was right, the

solar stuff and wind was simply too complicated or the students too dense. To add to the situation, Doc said the Molly was expecting twins, gender unknown. Jan wouldn't be going, she had a new baby to tend to. Andy would ride with me in a Hummer, me driving and him manning the gun.

We had 2 Ma Deuces and 1 Mk 19. To effectively utilize them we needed one more Hummer, uparmored with a ring mount. We'd form a caravan of 3 Hummers and 2 semis, with each tractor being led by a Hummer and followed by a Hummer. Ralph decided to run the Hummer with the Mk 19 between the two tractors. We pulled a single trailer with extra fuel for the Hummers. We lay over for a day at the National Guard post while we got a battery charged and the vehicle to run.

The interstate highways were covered with ice and about half snow packed so we had to use chains, never a pleasant experience. What should have been a 3 hour trip from the Capital to the first out-of-state city took closer to 8 hours and it was almost dark by the time we arrived. We found a place to hole up and accessed the Yellow Pages for each of the two cities from the phone company. We assigned guard duty to the young men with Jake, Ralph and me on call, our having been through more firefights than either Richard or Don who had almost no experience.

Preacher and Doc had stayed on the farm. The, rarely discussed, other survivors from the Capital jail (liberals, I'm sure) agreed to stay behind and keep the roving patrol running using pickups and small arms. This city was only slightly smaller than our Capital and all other things being equal, there should be some survivors here. The next city was the Capital of that state and was smaller yet. I located wind and solar sources, not in one location like before, in both cities. A third location in each city listed golf cart batteries in their Yellow Page ads. The city map in the phone book was little help in finding those locations, but, they rarely are. That's one of the things that I missed about the internet, MSN Maps.

"I didn't figure we'd get through the night without problems. You find all the places we need to go?"

"I have the addresses, but the phone book map didn't have enough detail."

"I expect we'll need to find a good city map then. Any idea where to look?"

"I don't know, maybe a bookstore."

It being the largest city in the state, we found a bookstore and finally a city map. We also picked up a map of the Capital so I could find those addresses too. We started at the solar place because it was the closest. From there, we added batteries and finally wind turbines. They were a different brand from those we had, but they were complete with towers, wire, controllers and heavy duty, high wattage inverters. We had no contact with any survivors in either city, however that changed on the way home. On the outskirts of the big city, we ran into the chugga-chugga-chugga and it wasn't our Ma Deuces firing.

"Trouble."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's not our Ma Deuce. Seems to me that there must be some survivors who cleaned out a National Guard post. Any ideas?"

"Can we back up and go around?"

"The interstate is on the other side of the river. I suppose we could take 77 north and go east from there."

"Can we get the semis free?"

"Bring up that Mk 19 and the other Ma Deuce, we'll provide covering fire while they pull a U turn through the median."

"With all the snow there is?"

"There's a crossover. We all have chains on, we can make it."

"The sign says this is 77."

"Yeah but it exits to the north a ways back. We'll get the semis headed that way and do a running withdrawal." (A withdrawal may be anticipated, as when a defending force is outmatched or on disadvantageous ground, but must cause as much damage to an enemy as possible.)

"Andy, is the Mk 19 ready?"

"Show me a target, dad."

"Slow down Tiger, all we're trying to do is protect the semis until they're out of range of the local survivors."

"What if they have uparmored Hummers like we do? We can't take one out with anything we have with us."

"Sure we can, down around your feet are some AT4s and LAW rockets. Thing is, I don't want to get that close to them, for all we know, they may have some too. Man, what I wouldn't give for a couple of Javelin missiles right now."

"Why?"

In The Aftertime – Chapter 27

"Oh, you wouldn't know would you? They have a range of around 2,500 meters and are fire and forget. They can be used in a direct fire mode or an over the top mode and are capable of destroying any Main Battle Tank that exists."

"Including ours?"

"Damn tooting."

"Now you think of it. We probably could have found some at the National Guard post if we had looked. Wait, I see them. Hang on, I'm going to send them a greeting."

Chugga—chugga--chugga, the rate of fire on the Mk 19 is lower than the M2HB, but it throws bigger bullets almost as far. That Mk 19 is a temperamental piece of equipment, but it can put out a can of grenades in a minute. Ralph had already crossed the median and pulled up short while our other two Hummers joined him. We moved west on the interstate, three abreast, lobbing .50 caliber and 40mm shells in their direction. When they didn't follow, we let out a sigh of relief and turned north on 77. From there, we had to follow 77 north to our river crossing, less than 100 miles on the other side of the river, but maybe 20 miles further on this side of the river. From there, we'd pick up 20 and take it east to the interstate and turn north for home.

We had everything we'd set out to get and as far as the trouble, no harm, no foul. However, I do plan to go back to the National Guard post and look for some Javelin missiles, just in case we have to make another trip like that. I wanted to tell Andy not to say anything to either his mother or Jan, but that wouldn't fly long, the cat would be out of the bag and there would be hell to pay. We did agree to minimize the trouble because there weren't any bullet holes we had to explain away.

Worst disaster in the history of the world or not, people are still people and their reactions don't change much. Yes, some sheeple finally realize that that won't cut it and dared to pick up a firearm, but inside, they're pretty much the same, Preacher comes to mind. I wonder if his gun is even loaded. Unless something really bad happens; which can turn a pacifist into a cold blooded killer. You know what I mean, you go to town to pick up more food and come home to find your wife and children murdered and you suddenly have a new mission in life, revenge. So now I have an adopted son who has presented us with a grandson, 3 children of my own and two more on the way. I just have got to cut down on the travel. Jan and Andy's baby was a boy who they named Andrew James Brown, III.

We distributed the power systems to the Ingram's and anyone else we'd overlooked and as soon as the ground thawed, poured concrete for the tower bases. While we waited for the concrete to cure, we added solar to the new community center and then the other farms. Thirty days later we were erecting the preassembled towers and everyone had power. Because of those arsonists, we had to go back to Richard and Don's town to get

propane and we added a 1,100 gallon tank for the community center.

Ralph, Jake and I agreed that if we were judicious in our use of propane, there was probably enough scattered around the state to keep us going for years. We could, in the mean time, seek out wood burning kitchen stoves and rig another means to have hot water. We had options, including using those on demand heaters. Plus they had a new project they wanted to discuss, a greenhouse. This was beginning to sound like some of the patriot fiction stories I read.

I mean, add it up: we're riding horses most of the time, more often than not using cowboy guns, we're scavenging for those few things we can't produce, trying with only moderate success to maintain some degree of morality (at least no cheating so far), had been required more than once to defend ourselves – am I missing anything major?

As for a greenhouse, we could use frame construction and wouldn't need a concrete floor, just a foundation. We'd need Lexan or Plexiglas to enclose it, a watering system and a means to vent the heat if it got too hot inside. My well could handle it, provided we install a water tower of some kind and the well pumped for longer periods. You'll notice that since they agreed to do my farming, we'd gained the community center, soon to be followed by a greenhouse. At least they'd leave us enough room for a large garden and our number of mouths to feed was increasing. I was surprised they didn't suggest moving the canning operation to the community building.

"Why didn't you tell me you had trouble on the trip?"

"What's to tell? A group of survivors had raided a National Guard post much as we had done and were similarly armed. We turned around and beat feet out of the trouble area and made it home with no other trouble. I did realize that no matter how prepared you are, there is always room for improvements."

"I'm trying very hard not to let this upset me Jack. But you keep this up and I'll become a widow for a second time."

"After we get the greenhouse framed in, I need to make a trip to the Capital to get the Plexiglas and I'll avail myself of the opportunity of getting those improvements I mentioned. I've been meaning to ask, how are we fixed on clothes for the kids?"

"Richard was a God send, we have most of what we need and he said there was more from where that came from. You changed the subject. I'd like to know how you have managed to get into so much trouble and have walked away without a scratch."

"Not totally, I got cut up by the concrete chip, remember?"

"I remember, Band-Aid wound."

"I do wear body armor, it helps. We try to use whatever equipment that the situation

calls for. That's why I need to stop by the post, I suddenly found myself wishing for a Javelin missile or two in that situation we ran into. It's an ideal weapon against both lightly and heavily armored vehicles. We were only up against Hummers, but our LAW rockets and the AT4s have a limited range while the Javelin doesn't. I promise we won't go anywhere we don't absolutely have to."

"I'll hold you to that. This pregnancy has been the worse so far. My body simply wasn't designed to carry twins."

"If you want to stop, I can have a word with Doc and get clipped."

"Are you willing to give up on the idea of a baseball team?"

"Of course, all I wanted was a basketball team."

"Ok, but wait and make sure the babies are ok first."

o

"Of course, I can do it Jack. I can do it as a reversible or non-reversible procedure. Have you given this serious thought?"

"Molly and I discussed it and with the twins, we'll have five children. She's having a terrible time carrying twins and I offered because she is out of birth control. She said we could wait until we knew the twins were ok."

"Come see me when you decide."

We had the greenhouse framed in and ready to go, excluding the Plexiglas, by early April and Jake and I would be making the trip to the Capital. Someone suggested adding grow lights, explaining we could mix cool white and warm white bulbs to produce the desired effect. We thought it would probably be easier to find those than grow lamps and added fixtures and bulbs to our list. We judged we could haul all of the Plexiglas in one trailer by standing it on its end. We could haul the fixtures in the pickup in the same way, standing them on end. If we ended up with insufficient fixtures, a second trip could be made to get more and more bulbs.

The trip to the Capital was uneventful, this time, and we returned in a few hours with most of the needed supplies. The Plexiglas was put in place using grout and screws and it only took 2 days to enclose the structure. At the peak of the roof, 4' wide partitions could be raised to vent the greenhouse if it overheated. It was a manual system using gears and chains, but it worked.

We were short of fixtures and would go back for more, come fall. We wouldn't need them before then and it was getting toward planting time. With the greenhouse, we were able to grow starts for everyone's garden and added the extra plants to our garden. Our

garden became about half again as big as it had been. Molly and I agreed to harvest seed from the extra plants because it was too much food to eat. We'd had a simple barter economy and that greenhouse changed that. No longer would I have to worry about growing animal feed or crops like wheat and soybeans. We became seed producers instead and provided all of the community's plantings.

Despite her problems with her pregnancy, Molly gave birth to twins, girl and a boy, Cynthia Lynn Brown and John Jacob Brown, Jr. The babies came about three weeks early and were just over 5½ pounds each. Doc said despite their timing, he wouldn't consider them premature because of their weight.

"Jack, the World Health Organization tracked premature births based on birth weight and anything over five pounds eight ounces was considered mature. Your babies are twins and low birth weights are not uncommon. I don't think you have anything to worry about. They're breathing normally and all the factors we normally check are well within limits."

"Thanks Doc."

"You outdid yourself Molly, both a girl and a boy."

"It's going to take me months to get my figure back, if I can. I hope I have enough milk for the two of them."

"Molly, don't worry about that, the greater the demand, the greater the production," Doc assured. "As far as getting your figure back, I don't know how you've managed to do it so far. Whatever you do seems to work, so if you keep doing the same, you'll get it back."

On top of everything else, Molly had managed to find time to exercise, restoring her muscle tone. This time, she'd have more babies to tend to and less time to exercise. I'd help out all I could but I couldn't feed the babies until they were able to eat food. Not having a field to tend would help; I could pitch in with the harvesting and canning.

By now, we probably had more canning jars than we could ever use. Fortunately, Nancy's friend had a large supply of the long life lids, but we'd almost used those up. The rubber strip in the lid got hard over time, causing the jars to fail to take a seal. Gaskets in unused lids work well for at least 5 years from date of manufacture. The alternative was to use wax to seal the food, a method that was used into the early 20th century. If a lid failed, we might replace it and bring the pressure canner up to pressure for a couple of minutes. It was just a thought.

It was a good thing we were producing food. We had enough food to feed our enlarged family and some to trade if we ever found anyone to trade with. There were those folks in the state to the west, but they fired on us so it was iffy at best whether that would be a good idea. I was more than certain that Molly would throw a hissy at the mere mention

of going back.

Nancy had become our part time housekeeper and also helped Jan because she had more work than she had time or hands. On top of that, Nancy and Michelle helped gather, process and can our garden produce. Andy and Steve took care of the livestock and our herd was growing. We had enough horses to give everyone two mounts. Although we realized that eventually the farming equipment would wear out and we'd have to find an alternate form of power, there were opposing camps. One camp wanted to find draft horses and antique farm equipment. The other camp wanted to use oxen to pull the same antique farming equipment. Oxen were still used widely in the world before and all they were was large steers.

An ox is nothing more than a mature bovine with an "education." The education consists of the animal's learning to respond appropriately to the teamster's (ox driver's) signals. These signals are given by verbal commands or by noise (whip cracks) and many teamsters were known for their voices and language. In North America, the commands are (1) get up, (2) whoa, (3) back up, (4) gee (turn to the right) and (5) haw (turn to the left). Oxen must be painstakingly trained from a young age. Their teamster must make or buy as many as a dozen yokes of different sizes as the animals grow. A wooden yoke is fastened about the neck of each pair so that the force of draft is distributed across their shoulders. From calves, oxen are chosen with horns since the horns hold the yoke in place when the oxen lower their heads, back up, or slow down (particularly with a wheeled vehicle going downhill). Yoked oxen cannot slow a load like harnessed horses can; the load has to be controlled downhill by other means. The gait of the ox is often important to ox trainers, since the speed the animal walks should roughly match the gait of the ox driver who must work with it.

Oxen can pull harder and longer than horses, particularly on obstinate or almost unmovable loads. This is one of the reasons that teams were dragging logs from forests long after horses had taken over most other draught uses in Europe and North America. Though not as fast as horses, they are less prone to injury because they are more sure-footed and do not try to jerk the load.

I figured there was no time like the present to select a pair of steers to train both them and myself. I got some help making the first yoke and once the harvest was done, had all winter to conduct the training. One of those liberals from the Capital jail had been out on his own searching, frankly I'm surprised he didn't run into some MZBs and get his butt shot off. However, he located a farm museum three cities to the east where there were all manner of animal drawn farm equipment. On top of that, there were wagons, buggies and an assortment of oxen yokes to serve as a pattern for what I needed to make.

He came around looking for Jake, he said. He proceeded to tell me of his find. I became excited and he asked if what he found could be of some use.

"Some use? Man, our tractors are wearing out for lack of repair parts. I've been training

a pair of oxen for a replacement. You're damn tooting those things can be of some use. By the by, Jake lives on the next farm over, but I sure am glad you stopped by. What do you figure it would take to haul what you found back here?"

In The Aftertime – Chapter 28

"A lot of the stuff is more bulky than heavy. I think maybe a pair of lowboy trailers pulled behind a pair of semi tractors would account for most of it. Might need to make two trips, all depends on what you take. You're Jack, right?"

"Yes, that's me."

"You say you're training oxen?"

"Just started after the harvest season. Might take some time, I'm not a teamster and am learning as I go."

"Seems to me that in a few years the only modern thing we might have is rifles."

"I suppose that will be the case. We can seek out replacements for all of our appliances, but eventually, the wind turbines and solar will cease to function and we'll be pressed for a source of power. We'll be forced to find replacements for those or need to learn to live without the convenience of our appliances."

"I've been out a little on my own, you know. Been trying to see what's available to salvage. Ran into a pack of feral dogs; that's what finally convinced me I needed to go armed. About all I have is a pump shotgun and very little ammo. Someone said you have guns."

"Running out of our ears. Ammo, too. Any idea what you want?"

"Maybe a pistol with a clip. A semi-auto rifle might be nice, if you had enough clips."

"They aren't clips, they're magazines. I can fix you up with a model 1911 pistol with extra magazines and ammo. I can also fix you up with a Ruger Ranch rifle in either the Mini-14 5.56x45mm or the Mini-30 in 7.62x39mm."

"Good guns?"

"The 1911 was the official handgun for our military from around 1911 to about 1985. The Ruger rifles are based on the M14 rifle which was an improved Garand developed in the 1950s."

"Bigger is better, right? I'll take the Mini-30 and a 1911, please."

I gave him what I had, the 1911 with five 7-round magazines, the Mini-30 with some 10-round steel and some 30-round plastic magazines. I added 500 rounds of Speer Lawman 230 grain and a full case of Wolf 124 grain FMJ. I then directed him to the range where he could get the rifle sighted in. When he finished, I said, he should come back to the house and we'd drive over to the big farm and talk to Jake and Ralph about his find.

"Antique farming equipment? Would it just be easier to find replacement tractors and such? The antiques will wear out too and they require much more labor."

"Nevertheless, Jake, I'd like to have the antiques because I'm training a team of oxen."

"Any lowboys sitting at the truck stop?"

"If I recall correctly, at least one, maybe two. I know for sure one was empty. The tractors have been sitting so long, we'll probably have to use the tractors we have. Sure would appreciate the help, if you can spare the time."

"It's winter and about all there is to do is chores. Of course we can help, where do you propose to store the stuff once you get it?"

"I'll make room in my pole barn and if I need to, cover some of the equipment with tarps until I can come up with a better solution."

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Most of the equipment was either stored indoors or heavily coated with grease. There was a little rust, but nothing that wouldn't come off after a little use. We only had one lowboy and there was enough equipment for three trips. After the first trip, Jake stayed on the big farm and Ralph and I retrieved the equipment. He took a buggy and said he was going to break horses to harness so he'd have an environmentally friendly vehicle for local travel. I think he had Sue in mind but he'd need a cab instead of a buggy if he brought his whole family.

We had quite the assortment of horse drawn equipment that could also be oxen drawn. Only the personal conveyances really required a horse although in a pinch even they could be oxen drawn. We had a pair of geldings and I decided I would work with them in addition to the oxen so I could get them trained to harness. They were yearlings so they didn't have many bad habits and I hadn't broken them to saddle yet.

The argument over whether horses are creatures whose will needs to be broken to suit them to the wills of human beings, or whether they are creatures with whom it is possible to form cooperative, even symbiotic, relationships still persists into the present. There are present-day proponents of subordinating horses by force, but these individuals generally rely on skills handed down via oral tradition from older sources and seldom put their techniques down in writing, sometimes because they are aware that such views are often considered socially unacceptable, but other times because they may consider their methods humane but a "trade secret."

I wanted horses broke to both saddle and harness and had to take the gentle approach because I couldn't risk a broken neck assuming I got thrown. From the time she could toddle, Kenzie had bonded with her foal. When it came time for her to ride, I saddled the

horse, Kenzie looked it in the eye and mounted. That got me into the gentle mode of horse training. The first thing, I decided, was to harness the horses and just let them become accustomed to the harness before I hooked them up to anything. Once I had them broken to harness, I could ease into the saddle using the same method, all the while establishing a bond with the horses.

For the remainder of the winter, when I wasn't helping with chores, I worked with the oxen and the two geldings. Other than the trips to pick up the antique equipment, we didn't stray far from home. Perhaps, in retrospect, that was a wise decision. Around the time came to plant our gardens, the roving patrol sounded the alarm. We had hostiles to the west, lots of them. We fired up the Hummers and went to greet these hostiles.

They had three Hummers, the same as we had. One had a crack in the front window. Thinking back to the confrontation in the other state a while back, it occurred to me that maybe these were the same people. Ralph had been livid about my comment that we couldn't go up against uparmored Hummers. It seems that the full load out for the Mk 19 had been HEDP rounds which would have badly damaged a Hummer. That was then and this is now, and now I knew better. Did these people also know better? Seems like maybe they did, a man dismounted one of the Hummers and walked about half the distance to where we were parked.

"Jack, you go talk to him and we'll cover your back," Ralph said over the radio. "You're more of a diplomat than either of us."

Yeah, right. I slung the HK91 over my right shoulder and began walking towards the man. As I approached, I could see that he had his rifle slung, a FAL, if I'm not mistaken. I continued my approach until we were about 10' apart.

"Can I help you with something?"

"We've been out looking around to see if we could find other survivors. Our first clue that there were any in our area came a while back when a convoy of 2 tractor trailer rigs and 3 Hummers came into our city and did some scavenging."

Bingo!

"That was us. We recovered solar and wind equipment for power generation. We didn't take all there was, we left a lot of it in your Capital. I guess I'm glad now that we didn't shoot the Mk 19 at you."

"I wondered about that. We didn't only because you didn't, although we didn't realize how well you were armed."

"Just the usual, various rockets, grenades, a couple of .50 caliber machine guns."

"You say that like you're a long term survivalist type."

"Not really, more of a prepper than a full fledged survivalist. It has been a steep learning curve and the more we learn, the more we find we have to learn."

"My name is Robert Younger."

"I'm John Brown. If you tell your people to stand down, we'll reciprocate."

Bob spoke into a Spearhead radio and their gunners sat back down in the Hummers. I spoke into my Spearhead and our side did the same. A comment about the Spearhead radio. It's a handi talky that is compatible with the SINCGARS radio and as such is capable of frequency hopping. Each group was using a different set of channels, consequently we couldn't hear them and they couldn't hear us.

Weighing 550 grams, inclusive of battery, the Spearhead is the smallest and lightest frequency-hopping secure VHF radio available today. The components are leading-edge and provide broad expansion capabilities. Spearhead is software-programmable and modularized, enabling the creation of configurations to meet specific customer needs. The rugged Spearhead system gives the individual soldier lightweight, secure communications anywhere on the battlefield. Spearhead also utilizes country-unique COMSEC and TRANSEC. It operates in any combination of clear, encrypted and single-channel/frequency-hopping transmission modes.

"We have a community center. How about we move there and continue this discussion?"

"We need to do that, too few people left in the world for the good guys to be killing each other off."

"Molly, come back."

"What's happening, Jack?"

"I think we may have met some good guys. Could Nancy, Jan and you get some coffee and hot water for tea going in the community center?"

"Right away. I have a million questions."

"So far, I only have one answer. You'll be there and can get up to speed at the same time as the rest of us do."

"I'll call the women and have them come too."

"Ok, see you in a few."

By the time we made it to the community center, the parking area was filled with vehi-

cles. Inside the ladies waited to find out what exactly was going on. They had several pots of coffee brewed and hot water for tea. Someone brought a pan of cinnamon rolls.

"I have more rolls in the oven, but they need to bake first, Jack."

"Thank you Nancy."

I knew that Nancy was baking bread today and that usually meant she made a pan of cinnamon rolls. All she had to do was take the unbaked loaves and could have cinnamon rolls in the oven in about 15 minutes. Her cinnamon rolls were nothing more than bread dough, buttered and sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon.

"My wife makes something similar to these cinnamon rolls."

"Oh, your wife survived the illness?"

"No, I was referring to my second wife. Did your wife survive?"

"No, she didn't, but I remarried too."

"We only have one family that came through the illness intact."

"Really? We happen to have two and they're related. The wives are sisters and the husbands are fourth cousins."

"This is our first jaunt outside of our city limits. We haven't even gone to the Capital to check on the people there."

"We didn't see any, but I doubt that means much. We didn't see you until we were on our way back."

"By the time we tried to follow you, you had disappeared."

"We took 77 north."

"Should have figured that, didn't. Don't suppose you'd be up to doing some bartering, would you?"

"We might, what do you need?"

"Food, and a lot of it."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 29

"Really? Not farming?"

"Gardens only. We aren't growing wheat, oats, corn or soybeans. We were starting to get low on the essentials and decided we really needed to find someone who was growing food."

"We have tons of grain and hundreds if not thousands of jars of home canned foods. What would you propose to use in exchange?"

"I doubt you want paper money, but we do have gold and silver. We have access to other things, too. Just name what you want, to give me an idea of what you need."

"Our farm tractors and some of the equipment are wearing out. I started to train a team of oxen and horses as a rainy day measure."

"We have parts and mechanics. Anything we don't have might be found in your state Capital or other large cities."

"That would be a start. We have livestock too. You name it, we might have it. We have cured meats like bacon and ham, frozen beef, pork, chickens and turkey."

"On the last day that gold and silver were traded, the spot price was \$1,507.30 an ounce for gold and \$27.24 for silver. Do you suppose that would be a good basis to value the metals?"

"Do you have the spot prices on the commodities?"

"Yes, we have all the prices."

"If we take the fair market value of the parts and labor you provide, we can trade a like value of food, based on the prices the last day gold and silver traded. That's about the only way I can figure to keep some sort of status quo."

"Subject to the approval of the people in my group, sounds good to me. Art, can you get with someone and check out their equipment and see what they need?"

"Jake, why don't you take Art to your farm and check out your equipment. Then you can come here and check out mine. Anyone else who needs their equipment repaired can see Art or Robert about it."

"Make that Bob."

"I go by Jack."

Jake and Art left to check out the equipment. The remainder of us went through the long process of introductions. We filled one trailer with gunny sacks of grain, the second with canned food, coffee and tea and the last would be filled just before they left with Styrofoam coolers of frozen food. Bob paid for the goods with 15 one-tenth ounce Gold Eagles. He indicated that they didn't want to be beholding and would take more food for the equipment repairs. At last, our first real transaction with an outside community! We could easily kick up production a notch to provide for their needs.

Jake and Art returned some time later and checked over my equipment. Art made a list of parts he was sure he needed and some he might need once he got into making the repairs. We had lunch, loaded their frozen goods and they departed, planning on being home that night.

Coffee and tea – our supplies were running low. Surely, every grocery store, every Sam's Club and Wal-Mart, every Costco had some or even large quantities. There had to be grocery distribution centers, somewhere. I picked up a large plastic container of chili powder and learned that it was packaged in the city immediately north of the Capital. It was time for another trip. The one thing we hadn't done was check all of the grocery stores in the Capital and there were lots of them. Ralph said he doubted that the MZBs had taken more than quick meals, based on what they'd been fed.

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On the way to the Capital in the Hummers, each pulling a trailer and escorting two semis, a conversation was struck up.

"What I can't understand is why they shot at us instead of trying to contact us," Jake said. "They could have done that easily enough."

"I agree, they should have done that," Ralph replied. "If they would have we could have helped out much sooner."

"Sounds like a whole lot of woulda, coulda and shouda, fellas. The fact is they contacted us now and it looks like they're going to solve a major problem, getting our equipment repaired."

"Jack, let's wait until it's actually repaired before we pass judgment on that," Ralph replied.

"The good side is that I looked at label and we're on our way to the Capital to load up on spices, tea and coffee."

"And, rice and beans and any other staples we find."

"Those too."

"There's a Costco on the west side of the Capital, out near the interstate."

"Want to start there?"

"It's as good as any. Must be 50 grocery stores in the Capital, maybe more."

"Way more Ralph, there's over a hundred."

Eventually we'd learn that there were 125 grocery stores from large to mom and pop operations. It was a case of we could shop until we dropped and come back for more. However, we lacked storage space for all the goods we could get and concentrated on a few select items: toilet paper, spices, beans, rice, pasta and coffee on our first trip. There would be many more trips to come and some food simply doesn't go bad, like beans, rice and pasta. Some foods age, like the spices, and usually carry a 'best if used by' date.

"We did fairly well."

"Yes, Ralph, we did. I wouldn't mind having more storage though and lay in a lot more stores."

"There are three steel building distributors in Capital. Maybe we could find a complete building, haul it up here and assemble it."

"I wasn't talking about a shed."

"Neither was I, Jack. They have everything from sheds to airport hangars. We wouldn't even have to pour concrete except for the foundation. You're not growing crops and you're garden spot isn't that large so you could probably assemble several buildings."

"I have to keep some pasture for the stock."

"Even so, you could put in a series of warehouses, up to the number of steel buildings available and store food for all of us."

"How would we keep track of all of those goods?"

"You have a computer, you could use a spreadsheet or a database program."

"I have Excel, don't have Access."

"It's only as far away as the nearest store that sold software."

It turned out that Jan knew a little about Access. Enough, she said, to set up an inventory program that identified the item and its location. I think she probably used a pre-existing template. We started that project by having her inventory our existing supplies.

The next three trips to the Capital resulting in our bringing back three large steel buildings, which we stacked in place. When the weather permitted, we put in foundations and make ready to erect the buildings.

First there was the little matter of producing the plantings for the community and planting our garden. And no, Molly wasn't expecting another baby for the first time in a long time. She looked fit and trim, about like when I'd met her, except perhaps a little more upstairs. Actually, they seemed to vary. With gardens in and the crops planted, we began what would best be described as another barn building project, except that we were assembling steel buildings.

It seemed like each manufacturer had their own scheme of things when it came to assembling the buildings. Plus, we basically lacked instructions. It took much of the summer, when people weren't otherwise occupied, to get the three buildings up. The first trip to the Capital would be to get shelving for the buildings. If we couldn't find steel shelves, we'd have to haul wood and build our own.

Art came back with two helpers and they repaired all of the machinery or made a list of parts they still needed. They put a value on what they done and handed me a grocery list saying to fill as much of it as they'd earned. Thanks to Jan's Access program, I was easily able to pull up the prices that the goods had on the store shelves. We used the lowest price we'd found, not wanting to gouge. We filled them up and indicated they were entitled to a little more than they lacked the capacity to haul.

There were many more people in the distant city than we had in our community. However, they also had a Costco and probably several Sam's Clubs. I'd seen the Costco when we'd passed through; can't remember if it was coming or going. Maybe I dreamed it. There isn't that much food in a Costco, a bit above your average store with the just in time inventory practices, but not that much. However, it all adds up.

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I guess the next thing that happened was Art and his helpers coming back to finish up the repairs. They brought an extra pickup and trailer and when the repairs were done, we settled up. We picked up 5 more of the one-tenth ounce American Eagles. He said that they'd be back. Sounds like a line out of movie, doesn't it?

Once we had all the crops put up, I had my feed supplies for the animals and what not, we returned to the Capital for the steel shelving. Didn't find enough to make it worth our trouble, but we took what we found. We went to a lumberyard and loaded a trailer and a half of plywood, OSB, nails, screws and posts.

For the next two months, we were busy building our shelving. We didn't have enough, but we could fill up what we had with food and life's essentials, if you know what I mean. It was nice to finally have time for my family and to stay home, most of the time. Molly said that the next time we went to the Capital salvaging she wanted to go along and

pick up things for the children. I knew there were, give or take, about a dozen gun stores down there and wanted to shop around myself. You can never have too much ammo and I might find a rifle I didn't have.

Rather than drive a convoy to the Capital, Molly and I decided to make a trip by ourselves finding things that we wouldn't be obligated to share with anyone but could if we chose. One sunny September day, we drove down and spent the day shopping. We didn't find everything we wanted and decided to spend the night. We found a big city hotel and climbed the stairs to the third floor where the rooms were. I looked until I found room that had been made up several years before and we settled right in.

What is it about staying in a hotel that seems to get the juices flowing? A different bed? Clean sheets? No one to hear your antics? We were early to bed and late to rise. She had a list of places she wanted to see and there were still those gun dealers I wanted to visit. Our state is one that prohibits all NFA firearms. Didn't matter, we'd been to the National Guard post and had all of those we wanted. Then, a thought occurred to me, the Capital Police Department was large. Why not check around for more bulletproof vests and such?

"When you finish up, Molly, I'd like to visit several gun stores and check out the police department."

"Don't we have enough guns?"

"Might find something I don't have. Before you ask about the Police Department, we don't have enough body armor to go around. We might find some new stuff. How many stores do you have on your list?"

"Four."

"Where to next?"

"J. C. Penny Company."

"We've been to a Penny's store."

"We have and I found what I was looking for but not in the right sizes."

"The downtown store?"

"Yes, and we can check the police department while we're downtown. I don't think we're going to make it home tonight."

"Do you really mind? Nancy is taking care of the kids."

"No one bit."

In The Aftertime – Chapter 30

(Good lovin' . . .)
(Good lovin' . . .)
(Good lovin' . . .)

*I was feelin' . . . so bad,
I asked my family doctor just what I had,
I said, "Doctor, . . .
(Doctor . . .)
Mr. M.D., . . .
(Doctor . . .)
Now can you tell me, tell me, tell me,
What's ailin' me?"
(Doctor . . .)*

*He said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,
(Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)
Yes, indeed, all you really need . . .
(Is good lovin')
Gimme that good, good lovin' . . .
(Good lovin')
All I need is lovin' . . .
(Good lovin')
Good lovin', baby.*

*Baby please, squeeze me tight . . . (Squeeze me tight)
Now don't you want your baby to feel alright? (Feel alright)
I said Baby . . . (Baby) . . . now it's for sure . . . (it's for sure)
I got the fever, Baby, Baby, but you've got the cure
(You've got the cure)*

*I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,
(Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)
Yes, indeed, all I really need . . .
(Is good lovin')
Gimme that good, good lovin' . . .
(Good lovin')
All I need is lovin' . . .
(Good lovin')
Good lovin', baby.*

The Young Rascals and several other groups

At least I'm healed. We picked up some soft body armor at the DMPD and after Molly had the clothing she wanted, I had a chance to check out the gun stores. One had been trashed, all the weapons and ammo were missing. Another one, an approved Springfield Armory dealer, hadn't been. Need I say more? He didn't have the National Match, the M21 or the M25. He did have one Super Match, four Loadeds and five Standards.

The Super Match must have been special order, there was a copy of an invoice taped to the box indicating paid in full. His loss, our gain. We took all ten rifles, a dozen assorted .45s, and every magazine we could find, some pistol, some rifle. The Standard and Loaded models have 1:11 twist, the Super Match, 1:10. We had M1As, but if no one wanted them, we could use them as trade goods. Except, of course, the Super Match. I'd start trading the standard models. However, with five children I seriously doubted I'd go beyond that.

Springfield's M1A is an excellent rifle. It is accurate, reliable, and powerful. While newer designs offer lighter weight, lower cost, and other improvements, the M1A is a practical and potent addition to any collection. Despite high recoil and a truly deafening report, it's out of the box accuracy, legality in almost all states, and relatively inexpensive ammunition make the M1A one of the most interesting rifles available; it is famous for reliability and durability as well. Its potential for upgrades and add-ons make it a logical choice for match shooting, as evidenced by its presence at the National Matches each year. It's worth the money and effort to acquire, and it is quite possibly the only mainstream 7.62x51mm semi-auto that is legal for purchase in states with assault weapons bans. Right, and who is enforcing those laws anymore?

Before the illness, there were more sheeple than preppers or survivalists. With that in mind, more sheeple died than preppers. Oh, the proportion was the same, 99.9%, but the upside was all those gun haters dying off. We were armed and after our earlier experience with one family being killed off, we stayed that way. As soon as you drop your guard, the big bad bogie man will get you.

We didn't revert 100 years to where people wore guns all the time because 100 years ago, people didn't wear guns all the time. If you believe that, you've seen too many Westerns. If you wanted to know how it really was, consider Tombstone under Virgil Earp, no guns allowed. It caused that brouhaha at or near the OK Corral. We wore guns all of the time we were out of the house so they would be available, if we needed them. In the house, the guns were put up out of the reach of curious children. In due time, each of my children, the four girls and my son, would learn to shoot, starting with a .22 rifle and working their way up to either a M16 or M1A.

On the agricultural front, as long as we could keep our equipment repaired, we were farming pretty much like farmers did before the illness. There wasn't a company to provide things like seed corn and we'd been forced to resort to heirloom varieties. We used Bloody Butcher which took 120 days – This dent-type corn has been grown in the United States since at least 1845. The stalks are ten to twelve feet tall with two to six ears of corn per stalk. The kernels are striped red or dark red on pink to red cobs. An occasion-

al white ear may appear. Can be used for roasting or frying when young but generally used for flour or corn meal. Good flavored. Several companies sold it and my wife Nancy had some put up for sweet corn. As far as the main question, *Is this all there is?* went, I concluded that the answer was simply, *Yes*. Was there anything wrong with that? *No*.

What more could a man want, a lovely wife, five growing healthy children, food on the table and more stored in the warehouses. Trading partners who could provide what we couldn't. A source of fuel and power that would last until we found some way to replace it. No more war, except for local conflicts with those MZBs. Hadn't seen any lately, but they were out there, just waiting to strike. It wasn't perfect, but it was the next best thing.

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